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The young African Woman and Sport

By FLORENCE PETRY-AMIEL

The enquiry, which Florence Petry-Amiel has just conducted in Central Africa, is of the greatest interest.

In the world of sport, this young journalist, herself an excellent athlete. (high jumper), is certainly an artist in her own field. Furthermore, her study of sport for women in African countries demonstrates her far-sightedness and wisdom. The conclusions that she has drawn and the suggestions that she has put forward also bear witness to her realistic outlook.

We should help African women to practise sport for many reasons: firstly because it is only reasonable that we should wish to see them taking part in activities which have brought us so much pleasure and benefit, and secondly because sport is a means of emancipating women. Because of our democratic ideas and our own customs, we should desire for these women the same consideration that is given to men, and, in this way, we can contribute to our own advancement.

But in order to help them, we must know and understand them.

Marie-Therese EYQUEM,
Principal Inspector of Youth and Sport
in France.

The need to awaken the African woman

Woman's nature is fundamentally passive ; she is content to wait, she is easily influenced and she has always represented more of a brake on the march of civilization than a spur. The African States have taken good note of this and of the part that women-can play in their future. Social and legislative measures have been taken to encourage women's participation in the political and economic life of these countries. Women of worth have emerged — energetic, clear — thinking and sensitive to outside Influences, and capable of adapting these influences to their surroundings. They have set themselves the task of working on the feminine population. The dead hand of tradition however remains practically all-powerful. The whole mentality of these women must be transformed.

In this respect, national education takes on a real sense of mission. The young literate generations, who have benefited from help and advice with regard to their professions and who have arrived at maturity, are making their mark on feminine evolution. It is they who must turn the scale little by little, yet irresistably, towards a real emancipation of the African woman.

Outside purely scholarly pursuits the furthering of leisure and of culture can be a helpful means of opening up new horizons. All useful means must be employed in making of the female population a living force.

Africa and women's sport - A false note ?

It is certain that proximity will give an impression of discord. For it is to suppose that a moral freedom exists, when, in actual fact, it is far from existing in the present society, and this idea of freedom is integrated with difficulty into the mind and character of the young African woman.

These psychological obstacles to women's participation in sport are more or less the same as those which existed in France not so very long ago.

It is first of all the fact of being unaccustomed to this idea. Such an idea is too new and upsetting, so without being necessarily against it, people are not yet 'for' it, because very simply it is 'not done'. That can also be due to the weight of tradition, and is also not very far removed from indifference. It is this conception which is contrary to social evolution, and which must be fought.

This timidity or opposition on religious grounds is deeper and resists more strongly. A parallel can be found in the social prejudice once found in France.

Sport is also a victim of the over-riding importance of intellectual matters, the growing cult of instruction and examinations. Physical — and manual — activities are considered of secondary importance, if not entirely superfluous.

Teachers wear themselves out trying to counteract the sheer indifference of the young African woman. To quote their own words: 'They must be woken up ; got out of their apathy' is what they say.

There is a great difference between dancing and sport

It is not for lack of a natural facility that the young African woman is so unfamiliar with sport. In countries where the majority of the inhabitants know nothing of gas, electricity or running water — and even less the means of transport — physical effort is a constant feature of daily life. It is the woman who has all the responsibility of looking after the home and a part of its upkeep. She begins at an early age to carry heavy loads on her head and to cover long distances on foot. In consequence, she acquires great powers of resistance and surprising strength and agility.

The qualities of speed and also the ability to relax so often found in these women must also be mentioned, and above all the suppleness — or more correctly a muscular repose — which is well in keeping with their naturally happy dispositions. This faculty of immediate and instinctive response to a musical rhythm is well-known. Dancing is the only physical activity which is practised for pleasure, as if it were something inborn.

The convinced minority

The beginnings of sport for women are inevitably bound up with education, developed to a greater or lesser degree in each country. The more material equipment it can provide, the more favourable is the scholastic framework from a psychological point of view. The young girl feels secure and the weight of tradition is less formidable. She is afraid of making a spectacle of herself by practising sport, and this fear is minimized by the collective character of the activity ; while the physical effort needed is taken as part of the school programme.

In the principal towns of every country, all the best schools have their basketball-teams and often volley-ball and athletics as well.

This school sport only touches, it is true, a very small part of the population, for it is only included in secondary education. In 1962, the selection for the Congo championships was only made from five establishments with a total of 900 pupils, and this in a country which has the highest school-attendance level in Africa — 75% or 51,000 girls. What matters for the moment is to bring to sport a minority of convinced people who, by virtue of their conviction, will form groups of future missionaries of sport in Africa. What also matters is to give to sport in each country a solid foundation based on the help given by the staffs of the

technical aid groups, and the African administrative services. Where serious efforts have been made in such a direction — as in the case of the Ivory Coast — very rapid and encouraging results may be expected.

It is very necessary that this progressive movement should not be halted by too many material cares, for the foundations on which to build are sadly lacking everywhere. In primary education, the teachers have had no training in physical education ; the existing swimming baths are impossible, there are no playing fields near the schools and often equipment is non-existent.

The change-over from dancing to sport presents all sorts of problems.

Conclusions to be drawn from Dakar¹

Without wishing to give an exaggerated importance to women's sport in these countries where so many problems present themselves, it must be stressed that sport has its place in the domains of education and leisure, and its deep social justification beyond the classic arguments.

The French and African leaders, men of feeling who are devoted to their task, will not readily accept this old Senegalese proverb : 'To force a man to drink means he is no longer thirsty.' At Dakar, the young African women made their appearance, and a very remarkable one, on the scene of international sport. Like the men's teams, they were encouraged, admired and applauded. These few young women bear witness — and in Africa too, that this enthusiasm exists, and their example will help to spread it.

F. Petry-Amiel.

¹ Dakar : The *Games of Friendship* which took place in 1963. They are considered as being the forerunners of future 'African Games'. (Ed.)