



## The young African Woman and Sport

### 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 irresistibly, 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 this 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.

### **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. 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 Dakar**

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.

Those 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 that in Africa too, this enthusiasm, this "thirst" exists, and their example will help to spread it.

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