

WOMEN AND MODERN SPORT

In the next century, opportunities for the female athlete to participate in sport at all levels and achieve success in the Olympic Games will be equal to those of her male counterpart.

While general worldwide sport participation rates by gender are difficult to obtain because of differences in definition of what constitutes a participant at various skills levels, an examination of the participation of women in the Olympic Games over the last century appears to support this prediction. The growth of women's sports in the Olympic Games during the last one hundred years has been impressive. Women were excluded from Olympic participation from ancient times through the advent of the modern Olympics in 1896. In the 1900 Paris Games, 19 women, less than 1% of all participating athletes, were allowed to compete in golf, tennis and yachting, but most didn't even realize their events were considered an official part of the Olympic schedule. It took a half century for the female athlete participation rate to rise to over 10% (11.1% in 1952, Helsinki), only 25 years to rise to over 20% (20.1% in 1976, Montreal) and another 20 years to rise another 15 percentage points to around 34% of all participants in the 1996 Atlanta Games. At the Games of the XXVII Olympiad in Sydney in 2000, women will participate in 38% of all Olympic events (168 men, 120 women, 12 mixed). The growth of participation is clearly accelerating. The progress made in sport reflects the advance of women's rights and participation in other cultural institutions. When women have been given the opportunity to perform in sport,

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their achievements have eliminated myths that have previously prevented their full participation and produced increased public awareness of the lack of gender equality in this area of human endeavour. Stereotypes and myths that suggest that women lack the physical ability and mental fortitude to excel in sport are rapidly disappearing. Such global intellectual enlightenment predicts an era of unprecedented sports opportunity for females.

The Impact of the Global Economic Movement

If the United States experience over the last 25 years is indicative, as more societies are encouraged to engage in capitalism and participate in global markets, the impact of this economic movement on gender equality in sport will be significant. In 1972, a United States national law, commonly referred to as "Title IX," prohibited gender discrimination in educational institutions with loss of federal funding as the economic penalty

for such discrimination. As a result, over a 25 year period, the number of girls playing top level high school sports went from one in 27 to one in three (for boys, participation is one in two). Participation of girls in high school sports grew from 7% to 40% of all female students. At the college level, participation of women grew from 16% to 38% of all athletes. As important is the fact that girls' and women's sports budgets expanded dramatically. Well-trained coaches were provided to this previously disadvantaged population and athletic financial assistance to female athletes in educational institutions went from being almost nonexistent to over \$180 million per year.

Where the participation of women in sport in the United States was broadly discouraged as inappropriate female activity prior to 1970, 55 million women now regularly participate in sports or fitness. Thirty-one million girls play team sports. Women represent 55% of all volleyball players, 43% of all runners and 41% of all soccer players. These mandated educational institution sport opportunities were directly responsible for American



Women's sailing.



domination in the new team sports of the Games of the XXVI Olympiad in Atlanta, the Centennial Games, in 1996 (soccer and softball) and the XVIII Olympic Winter Games in Nagano in 1998 (ice hockey). The result of these opportunities has been the development of three very new, large and potentially lucrative sports markets: (1) active females, (2) females as spectators of men's sports and (3) males and females as spectators of women's sports. American corporations are rapidly repositioning to exploit and develop these markets which have the potential of doubling the existing sporting goods industry in America. Where the American female was once a relatively narrow consumer of goods that enhanced her image as sex object, decorative object or caretaker of and purchaser of goods for other members of her family, she became an active consumer of athletic shoes and apparel and sports equipment herself.

This active female consumer demonstrated that she was more eclectic in her sports participation than her male counterpart, making her an even more lucrative customer. American males are pressured from a very early age to participate in one of three or four of the most popular men's professional sports. Females are under no such constraints. Therefore, American girls and women explore the worlds of dance, sport and exercise and are likely to participate in more activities than males. Each of these activities requires different shoes, apparel and equipment, which makes her a more desirable consumer.

Since 1994, the active female has demonstrated her sport consumer potential by outspending the American male in athletic shoes and apparel. Still, in the United States, change has progressed slowly with only 20% of all schools and colleges currently in full compliance with "Title

IX". Boys are still receiving twice the participation opportunities, scholarship dollars and athletic programs benefits. Thus, the purchasing power demonstrated by women to date is only the tip of the iceberg when one considers the fact that the active female consumer is 40 years old and under. Thus, this growth trend will continue for at least another 40 years as women catch up with men in education-based sport opportunities.

The economic power of female sports participants reflects the more equal treatment of women in the American workplace. The buying power of the active female will continue to grow as equity in the workplace better balances earning power. Female worker income in the United States currently exceeds US\$1 trillion annually, 80% of all retail purchase decisions are being made by women, and in 33% of dual income families, the woman is earning more than the man. Her expendable income in later years will exceed that of her male counterpart, simply because of her longer life span and inherited wealth, and the advent of a more active population of seniors.

When women were given the opportunity to play sports, they became as knowledgeable and as passionate about sports as their male counterparts. The female spectator currently comprises 35%-45% of the in-arena and television viewing audience of men's professional sports today. Every major men's professional league in the United States has a sport-marketing staff specifically dedicated to exploiting the female market.

The current women's professional team sports explosion in the United

States, the performance of women's team sports in the 1996 Olympic Games and the growing popularity of collegiate women's sports are other results of "Title IX". Few realize that it takes 15 to 20 years to develop an Olympic level or professional athlete. The American public is just beginning to see the result of female athletes



Women's hockey

receiving quality coaching, access to weight rooms, college athletic scholarships, national and international level competitive experiences and the encouragement of their parents and society at large.

These benefits were never present prior to the 1970s. Not only is there a large enough pool of elite athletes to support professional sports leagues, there are eager, loyal and interested spectators of males and females to support them. The male and female spectators who watch women's sports and the male and female spectators who watch men's sports are not the same people. This means an expanding sports spectator market that attracts investors and sponsors to women's professional sports leagues. Thus, it appears reasonable to maintain that the strongest impetus to creating expanded opportunities for women to play sports may well be the economic forces evolving from a global marketplace.



Joan Benoit, first Olympic marathon champion in Los Angeles in 1984.

Nationalism and the Acceptance of the Female Athlete

Even though there are still many nations in which cultural and religious barriers limit the participation of females in sport, the nationalistic fervor ignited by the Olympic Games and world championships coupled with widespread media coverage of these events removes these limitations, albeit in many cases temporarily. Even nations that disapprove of female participation in sport rally around the idiosyncratic female Olympic champion. At these historic moments, national pride supersedes the conflict of gender and, sometimes, even religion. Sport is a global cultural institution. As societies become more fragmented because of the merging of

racism and ethnic groups and business, art and other human pursuits become part of a global marketplace and experience, sport becomes one of the few activities that can focus a population on a common interest and transcend the bias, stereotypes and other barriers that divide human beings rather than unite them.

There is no reason to believe that the next hundred years will result in any diminishment of national pride. To the contrary, the more the nations of the world become globally interdependent, the greater the need for pride and more “politically correct” sources of differentiation. As women’s achievements in sport and contributions to national pride increase, pressure is placed on anachronistic

beliefs that the female athlete is less worthy of support, less productive or less important than the male athlete, and the myths promulgating gender inequality in sport begin to dissipate.

Influence of Global Communications

As developing countries improved literacy and generated sufficient wealth to give their citizens the means to access television and the Internet, the dissemination of the images and achievements of female athletes on a global scale created considerable pressure for social change. Televised sports events and print and Internet news imagery of sports competitions are the most easily translatable programming that can cross barriers of custom and

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language. The Olympics, world championship competition, continental and international league play are all highly desirable events of worldwide interest that were and will continue to be embraced by the media. Such distribution of images of competent, successful and highly skilled women created its own momentum, increasing the aspirations of females to participate in sport.

As female viewership of male and female sports events increased, economic pressure to support women's sports also increased. Advertisers of products utilized by female consumers began to sponsor women's sports events and targeted women who watched sports on television and in arenas. This investment fueled continued growth of women's sports and women's sports participation. In the United States, 1996 NBC Olympic female viewership was 65% and viewership among the most desirable female consumer demographics (18-34 years old) increased by 40% from Barcelona (1992) to Atlanta (1996).



Women's football at the Atlanta Games.

Widespread Knowledge of the Benefits of Sport Participation

Up until the 20th century, the popular justification of the value of sports participation was the training of males for war and business competition. Only during the last several decades have the positive physiological, psychological and sociological benefits of exercise and sports participation for both genders been widely disseminated to the public. If the United States experience is an indicator of the impact of health knowledge, the next century

will produce all-time highs in print and electronic media messages related to the benefits of exercise, health research results related to the positive impact of exercise, and the promotion of physically active lifestyles. There is also good reason to believe that the next century will champion a cultural and economic shift to preventive medicine, as opposed to the treatment of disease, with exercise and sports participation as primary elements of that approach.

Social Justice as a Global Value

As war and violence as means of resolution of conflict become more in abhorrent in a global sense, social justice ascends the value hierarchy. At its heart, social justice demands the cessation of inequality and discrimination on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, economic class and inconsequential differences among human beings. Social justice as a priority value in the next century is both a hope and a prediction. The weapons of war and violence have become too potent to permit their continued dominance. A social justice environment must fuel more equitable participation by women in all aspects of society - play, work and family.

It is even reasonable to predict that the next century will see a renewed emphasis on civility and skill as the primary determinants of sports victory as opposed to equating competition with violence and accepting malevolence against opponents. During the 1998 Winter Olympics, the media suggested that preoccupation of North American ice hockey teams with committing violence against opponents had diminished their skating speed, agility, and skills. On that same global stage, the world was embarrassed by the United States male ice hockey players' destruction of their living quarters. We may be seeing the vertex of the pendulum



Media coverage of women's sport.

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swing toward incivility if the public's disgust over strikes by professional athletes, their excessive salaries and blatant violations of law is any indicator. Does the millennium portend a swing back toward the more noble notions of sport? If so, female values that abhor violence may play a major role in determining the speed of this swing back to sensibility.

It is also reasonable to expect that the next century will create new roles for men and women in sports. Women will break significant barriers by participating in nontraditional sports from boxing to weightlifting to wrestling. There will be no sport that is closed to women because of her gender. Both male and female values will change, bringing both genders to more common and different ground. It is both likely and desirable that sport will have more rules that

prohibit violence and random physical assault. Women's sports will become more commercialized.

Yet, the challenges of sharing political power and mobilizing institutional commitment to the full participation of females in sport and society will continue. Progress will be slow and flawed with the expression of anger and sexism by generations of men and women who grew up in a different time and place and who were taught different beliefs about the role and capabilities of men and women. The good news is that major social change in gender roles will occur globally in the coming century; the bad news is that it will not come easily. The increased participation of females in sport and their widely disseminated achievements will positively contribute to this process.

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- National Collegiate Athletic Association.
- United States Olympic Committee



The Indonesian weightlifter Sri Inrjyani, Olympic Solidarity scholarship recipient and silver medalist at the last world championships.