



WOMEN ATHLETES OF THE CENTURY

How many lists of the greatest 100 athletes of the 20th century have been published during the last few months? Probably as many as there are newspapers and magazines published in the world. Journalism is opportunist by nature. How many women appear on these lists? Four, seven, ten at most. Is this small percentage justified? I do not think so. A century after they first participated in the Games of the II Olympiad in Paris in 1900, female elite athletes have provided sufficient proof of professionalism, improvement and steadfastness for their results to be better rated by the experts. For example, since 1968 (when electronic timing was first introduced) the men's 100m record has improved by 16 hundredths of a second, whilst the women's record has improved by 59.



Fanny Blankers-Koen, four-time Olympic champion in London in 1948.

by Natalia Arriaga*



The main risk run by someone drawing up a list of the greatest athletes, men or women, of the 20th century, is falling into the present-day trap of being impressed by the most recent records and the brilliant media presentation of the latest champions. In the case of women, who were given access to high-level sport at a notably later date, it is only fair to recall the achievements of those who opened the way.

The pioneers: Durack, Blankers-Koen, Comaneci...

One of these athletes, the Australian Fanny Durack, was the first female Olympic swimming champion, who succeeded in holding the world records of absolutely every distance contested at the time. At the Games in Stockholm in 1912 she won the only individual event in the Olympic programme, the 100m freestyle, after travelling to Sweden thanks to the generosity of family and friends who raised the money needed for her ticket. The team officials thought that including women in the group was an unnecessary waste of money. Those first decades of the century far from the extreme specialization required today, saw the birth of marvel-

lous multidisciplinary athletes, capable of coupling speed with stamina and power with agility. Fanny Durack was one of these athletes, but another woman with the same Christian name took this polyvalence to unsurpassed limits.

Last November, aged 81, Fanny Blankers-Koen was awarded the prize for the greatest woman athlete of the century by the International Amateur Athletics Federation. "The flying Dutch woman" accumulated six world records and went down in history at the Olympic Games in London in 1948 when she won, aged 30 and after having had two children, four gold medals (100m, 200m, 4x100m and 80m hurdles). In actual fact, she should have won more medals, but she did not enter the high jump and long jump events, in which she also held records. Up until now, no other woman has achieved a similar feat in Olympic athletic events.

Among the champions with long careers and extensive lists of victories there are many gymnasts. The Soviet Larisa Latynina stands out from them all, for between 1956 and 1964 she won 18 Olympic medals, nine of them gold. This was more medals than any other participant in the Games, an unequalled record, but one which was quickly surpassed in popularity and international recognition by a young Romanian girl destined to revolutionize world gymnastics.

Nadia Comaneci was the first gymnast to be awarded a ten in international competition. She chose an ideal stage upon which to demonstrate her perfection, the 1976 Olympic Games, where she received the highest possible score seven times.

The judges and the public could not believe such precision, but in the end they were forced to bow to the “bride of Montreal”, whose technical excellence attained figures which remain unbeaten on the beam, her favourite apparatus.; Between the Games in Montreal and those in Moscow, Comaneci amassed five gold, three silver and one bronze medal, placing Romania at the forefront of gymnastics, where it has remained ever since. Many other gymnasts have achieved a ten since then, but it was Comaneci who paved the way.

At the same time the Japanese Junko Tabei reached another historic milestone for women’s sport when she became the first woman to climb Everest in 1975. This summit was not enough for her, and in 1992 she was also the first woman to complete the Seven Summits - the highest peaks of every continent plus the South Pole. Minority sports and poorly paid sports are brought to the forefront thanks to the risks taken by pioneers such as Tabei.

impossible records: Griffith-Joyner, Balas, Koch, Fraser...

It was not possible to invite the fastest woman in history to any of the tributes paid last December to the greatest athletes of the century. Florence Griffith-Joyner died in 1998 from an epilepsy attack. Her records still survive, however, established ten years previously and still unbeaten. Griffith-Joyner, the athlete, was as fleeting as her life, but she did have time to set two historic records at the Games of the XXIV Olympiad in Seoul, (10.49 seconds in the 100 metres and 21.34 seconds in the 200 metres), to which no other woman has since come close. Six months after those records the Los Angeles athlete announced her retirement, and nine years later her husband announced her death. Despite the countless pages written regarding the



The gymnast Nadia Comaneci, Olympic champion on the beam in Montreal.

matter, there is no proof that this unexpected end had any relation to the preparation methods of the champion. Her records are the only truth.

Some decades earlier, Iolanda Balas’ records in the high jump lasted almost as long as those of Griffith-Joyner. Balas remained unbeaten for over ten years and won 150 competitions consecutively between 1956 and 1967, during which time she improved the world record 14 times, from 1.75 metres in 1956 to 1.91 metres in 1961. She won gold at the Olympics in Rome and Tokyo, with a difference of 14 and 10 centimetres respectively between her winning jumps and those of the silver medallists.

The East German Marita Koch was another tireless monopolizer of victories



The Australian Dawn Fraser three-time Olympic champion in the 100m freestyle.

and records. Before her achievement in 1979, no woman had beaten the 22 second mark in the 200 metres. But the 400 metres was the event in which her speed reached almost inhuman limits: the 47”60 seconds that she ran in 1985 remains a world record. This was the best, but only one of 16 records she set during her sporting career.

The record set by the Czech Jarmila Kratochvilova in the 800 metres in 1983 has lasted even longer. Her time of 1’53”28, like those of Griffith-Joyner and Koch, still awaits someone who can improve it or even equal it.

The Australian Dawn Fraser enjoyed the same superiority in the swimming pool. She held the world 100m freestyle record from 1958 to 1972. She knocked this down to a time of 1’01”5, leaving it in 1964 at 58”9, a record which remained unbroken until 1972. She was the first woman to swim this event in under a minute, and the first person to win the same Olympic title three times in swimming. She won gold in the 100 metres freestyle in Melbourne in 1956, Rome in 1960 and Tokyo in 1964. She also won medals and set records in the 200m, 400m and 4x100m freestyle.

Collectors of titles: Graf, Navratilova, Moser-Pröll...

Tennis is one of the few sports disciplines in which women have reached a high level of recognition, both socially and economically. Racquet sport has produced champions who will long be remembered for their number of titles (Margaret Smith Court), their charisma (Billie Jean King) and their early success (Martina Hingis), but if it had occurred to anyone to organize a match in order to determine the greatest female tennis player of the century, they would have to have invited Steffi Graf and Martina Navratilova.

Steffi Graf, whose success is still so fresh in our minds, won 107 professional titles during her career (1986-1999), among them four Australian Opens, six Roland Garros tournaments, seven Wimbledon tournaments, five US Opens, five Masters, a gold medal at the Olympic Games in Seoul and a silver medal at the Olympic Games in Barcelona. The new generations of young women tennis players were not her worst enemy during the last few years, for the German had to battle it out in the operating theatre and rehabilitation clinics due to successive injuries to her feet, hands, knees and back. She overcame all of this with her greatest virtue, steadfastness. When everyone had considered her career over, Graf returned from the shadows in 1999 to walk away with her sixth Roland Garros title and announce her imminent retirement. The time of Steffi Graf's tennis explosion coincided with the decline of Martina Navratilova's career. This great player spent two decades on court. Like Graf, she had to confront fundamentally unfavourable circumstances, but always came out on top. She broke all possible records: 20 seasons with at least one title under her belt, 167 individual tournaments, 9 Wimbledon titles, winning 74 consecutive matches, 18 Grand Slams and spending 332

weeks as number one. These figures are overwhelming, but they do not hide the human dimension of a real athlete, as sure in her convictions as with her racquet.

Less popular than the players mentioned above, the Frenchwoman Jeannie Longo also has an enviable record. The CV of possibly the best woman cyclist of all time lists a collection of titles that would be difficult to beat: 12 world championships in road and track, three Tours de France and three Olympic medals, including the road race gold medal at the Games in Atlanta when she was 37 years old. On several occasions she beat the one-hour record, most recently in 1996. Proof of the determination which always guided her are the sixteen attempts between November 1998 and January 1999 to beat this record, when she was already 40 years old and had announced her retirement.

On the ski slopes, no one has known as much success as the Austrian



Steffi Graf, Olympic champion in Seoul in 1988.



Annemarie Moser-Pröll, Olympic downhill champion in Lake Placid in 1980.

Annemarie Moser-Pröll. In addition to amassing a dozen medals in Olympic Games and world championships, only she has been able to win the alpine skiing world cup six times (1971-1975 and 1979). She holds the record of 62 world cup victories, 36 of them in downhill skiing.

The Norwegian Sonja Henie dominated the ice rinks in the inter-war Olympic Games, and her three Olympic gold medals in artistic skating have never been equalled. Henie made her debut at the tender age of 11, winning eighth place in the Games at Chamonix in 1924, however she soon moved up the scale, winning gold with overwhelming authority at St. Moritz in 1928, Lake Placid in 1932 and Garmisch-Partenkirchen in 1936. Her ten world championship triumphs illustrate Henie's superiority in skating during those years.

Against all odds: Rudolph, Quirot...

During the 20th century, sport offered admirable cases of self-improvement, beyond records or results. Among those female athletes who competed, above all, to win against themselves and their circumstances, Wilma Rudolph and Ana Fidelia Quirot stand out, two athletes from different eras



and of different origin, but who were both marked by misfortune.

The American lost the use of her left leg when, as a child, she suffered from, double pneumonia and scarlet fever. Thanks to the help of her family, and almost effortlessly, she managed to free herself first from her callipers and then from her orthopaedic shoes, to become an outstanding runner and, aged 16, join her country's Olympic team. At the Games in Melbourne, she won a bronze medal in the 4x100 relay, but it was at the next edition, in Rome in 1960, that she showed the true extent of her abilities: she was three-

times champion in the 100 and 200 metres and in the 4x100 relay.

The story of Quirot is also impressive. After becoming, in the second half of the eighties, America's greatest middle-distance runner, her career took a promising leap when she won the 800 metres bronze medal at the Games of the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona. In 1993, however, an unfortunate domestic accident gave her 38 per cent burns. The Cuban athlete, whose face, neck, thorax, abdomen and arms were affected, soon began painful rehabilitation and exactly ten months after the accident she reappeared in high-level competition. After

having a number of skin grafts to regain mobility in her trunk and extremities, Ana Fidelia regained not only her initial form but also markedly improved her results and was twice world champion, in 1995 and 1997, and Olympic silver medallist at the Games in Atlanta.

The most important sports gathering in history, the Games of the XXVII Olympiad in Sydney, will undoubtedly offer new stories, records and achievements by other women who, in a few years time, will appear in the best women athletes list of another century.

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Olympic Quiz

Answers

1. Larisa Latynina (Soviet Union/gymnastics; 18); Vera Cáslavská (Czech Republic/gymnastics; 11); Polina Astakhova (Soviet Union/gymnastics; 10); Agnes Keleti (Hungary/gymnastics; 10); and Raisa Smetanina (Soviet Union/nordic skiing; 10).
2. Larisa Latynina (Soviet Union/gymnastics; 9); Vera Cáslavská (Czech Republic/gymnastics; 7); Kristin Otto (East Germany/swimming; 6); Lidiya Skoblikova (Russian Federation/speed skating; 6); Lyubov Yegorova (Russian Federation/nordic skiing; 6); Polina Astakhova (Soviet Union/gymnastics; 5); Bonnie Blair (United States of America/speed skating; 5); Krisztina Egerszegi (Hungary/swimming; 5); Agnes Keleti (Hungary/gymnastics; 5); Nadia Comaneci (Romania/gymnastics; 5); Nelli Kim (Soviet Union/gymnastics; 5); Larisa Lazutina (Soviet Union/nordic skiing; 5); Birgit Schmidt-Fischer (East Germany/Germany/canoeing; 5); and Jennifer Thompson (United States of America/swimming; 5). Thompson has yet to win an individual gold medal, the only person on the above list with that distinction. She was won all hers in swim relays.
3. Kerstin Palm of Sweden competed in fencing at seven Games of the Olympiad, consecutively from 1964. through 1988.
4. Marja-Liisa Kirvesniemi-Hämäläinen of Finland competed in cross-country skiing at six Olympic Winter Games, consecutively from 1976 through 1994. Her husband, Harri Kirvesniemi, also competed in cross-country skiing at six Olympic Winter Games, from 1980 through 1998, which equals the record for men.
5. Jessiva Newberry-Ransehousen of the United States competed in dressage at the 1960 and 1964 Games of the Olympiad and then returned to the United States Olympic team 24 years later, competing in 1988. Christilot Hansen-Boylen of Canada also competed in equestrian events, competing between 1964 and 1992. Hansen-Boylen missed only the 1980 and 1988 Games.

6. Nations	Medals won by women	Medals won by men
Romania	109	104
People's Republic of China	98	78
Ukraine	13	11
Liechtenstein	5	4
Nigeria	5	3
Costa Rica	2	0
Zimbabwe	1	0
Hong Kong, China	1	0
Mozambique	1	0

7. At the Games of the XIX Olympiad in Mexico City in 1968, hurdler Enriqueta Basilio de Sotelo did the honors of carrying the Olympic Flame and lighting the torch.
8. In 1976, there were two Olympic Flames lit, in honor of Innsbruck hosting the Olympic Winter Games for a second time. Christil Haas lit one -the other was lit by Josef Feistmantl. In 1984, figure skater Sandra Dubravcic lit the lone Olympic Torch at the Sarajevo Opening Ceremony.
9. In 1956 at Cortina d'Ampezzo, the oath of the athletes was pronounced by Italian alpine skier Guillian Chenal-Minuzzo. In 1960, figure skater Carol Heiss was the second consecutive woman at the Olympic Winter Games to do so. The first time this occurred at the Games of the Olympiad was in 1972 in Munich when runner Heidi Schüller pronounced the oath of the athletes.
10. The first two women elected to the IOC were Flor Isava-Fonseca (Venezuela) and Pirjo Häggman (Finland), who were co-opted in 1981. Pirjo Häggman retired in 1999.