

## THE KINGDOM OF SPORT WAS A MAN'S GAME

**A modern International Olympic Committee should be an organization run by both men and women in sport. Equally important, a modern IOC should be an organization working to support both men and women in sport. By organizing this Conference, the IOC is sending a clear signal to the world of sport and to society as a whole that times are changing. I have been involved in the woman's movement during my political life over the last 20 years.**

Frankly, my first contacts with Dutch sports administrators as State Secretary in 1998 were a rude awakening. It seemed that time had stood still here. I had grown used to the Dutch political arena, where women play a prominent role. However, when I attended a high-level meeting of Dutch sports officials, I could count only three women in a group of one hundred people. Those present were managers and other administrators of Dutch sports federations and of the Dutch National Olympic Committee.

Of course, I knew that sports officialdom remained a male bastion. But I had no idea that things were this bad. I was surprised to see that men dominated the managerial side of sport to this extent in this day and age. This situation, however, is unacceptable. Things have got to change. That goes for the management side of sport. But that also goes for the support and recognition given to top female athletes, so I fully endorse this initiative taken by the IOC.

by Margo Vliegthart\*



My main focus in this speech will be on the following question: how can we - as governments and sports organizations - work to secure an equal position for women in sport. We must ensure that women have a much greater say in the running of sports organizations at every level. And we must work towards strengthening the position of active sportswomen, which includes greater recognition of their achievements and an improvement of their career prospects.

Let us take a look at the facts.

First and foremost, the Dutch government and the National Olympic Committee strive for a situation in which men and women have the same rights and opportunities.

Fortunately, there is no big difference between the number of men and women actively taking part in sports in the Netherlands. That also applies more or less to the narrower area of top sport, with the exception of football. For example, our team at the last Olympic Games comprised 139 men and 101 women.

So far so good. But now the downside.

In preparation for this conference we interviewed current and former women in top sports in the Netherlands. We have also talked with female coaches and sports administrators. By and large these sportswomen seem to be fairly positive about the developments in sport.

But if you question them further, they will point to many big problems, such as general lack of appreciation for female athletes, bleak career prospects for sportswomen, few opportunities to reach upper-level positions in sports organizations, prejudices against women and narrow-minded views of the role of women in society. I must say that their observations are right on the mark.

Women are lagging behind men in many areas of sports: appreciation, status, sponsoring, salaries, prize money and media attention. Maybe that is why some female athletes pose nude for a calendar to attract sponsoring as happened recently. Compared to men, women's possibilities for finding sponsors are much more limited. Of course they make their own decisions, but I see this whole affair mostly as a strong signal that there is a much wider problem.

With respect to the more technical sports job - I am talking about coaches, trainers, referees and so on - women are doing poorly in relation to men. Many women - some twenty percent - perform these technical functions as volunteers at middle and lower level. But few manage to become a top-class coach or referee, women are performing mostly unpaid jobs, while the paid jobs go to men.

If you look at the executive committees in the sports world, you will find that women are a small minority. For example, we have been taking a look at fifteen sports federations in the Netherlands. In an average sports federation, the executive committee includes only one woman and between five to eleven men. Indeed, it is a rarity to see two women. And some sports federations have no women committee members at all.

Those few women in the Netherlands who have reached top

positions in sports organizations, are concerned about the lack of progress in this area. I share their concern. The situation is somewhat better at club level. There we found that some 30 percent of committee members are women.

Part of the problem is that too few women are being put forward as potential members of executive committees. That is why I am very happy that Dutch IOC member Anton Geesink, himself a former Olympic gold medallist, would like to see that the top judoka Jessica

Gal proposed for appointment to the executive committee of the Dutch Judo Federation.

Having said that, prejudices and old-fashioned views of women's role in society are difficult to stamp out. For example, it has still not been widely accepted that women trainers, coaches and referees are in charge of male athletes. It made headlines around the world, when female German hockey player was appointed coach of a top-level men's hockey team in the Netherlands. The media followed her every move, the



*The Netherlands delegation at the opening ceremony of the Atlanta Games in 1996.*

reason being that she was the *woman* coach of a *men's* team. The publicity had nothing to do with her coaching qualities.

Remarkably, the sportswomen who were interviewed are of the opinion that it is the responsibility of women themselves to change the situation for the better. These female athletes believe that they will make headway, without any outside help. Every emancipation movement seems to have firm belief in its own capabilities. These sportswomen also have plenty of self-confidence, and that is fine.

However, experience shows that any attempt to change attitudes is an uphill struggle. So, these women can use all the help they can get. I believe that governments around the world, as well as national and international sports organizations are bound by duty to lend their support. If we pull together, we will be able to get results much sooner.

I fully endorse the objectives of the IOC relating to women in sport. As the standard bearer of international sport, the IOC has announced that it will seek to double the number of female IOC members in five years. So, twenty percent of members will be women instead of the current ten percent. That is a step in the right direction. I even hope that the IOC can be persuaded to set itself an even more ambitious target. Would not it just be great, if by the year 2020 half of all IOC members were women?

Finally, I would like to make some practical suggestions aimed at strengthening the position of women in sport, and creating more opportunities for women. It is vital that sports administrators and governments commit themselves to these objectives and provide sup-

port to initiatives taken by women, whenever possible.

One important tool for strengthening the position of sportswomen is the organization of mixed sporting events. Of course, the Olympic Games to be held in Sydney are a prime example. For the first time in history, the Olympics feature just as many team sports for men as for women. This is an important aspect because inclusion can generate more publicity for female athletes and attract sponsors.

There is much a government can and should do. By law, each government must ensure that, in principle, no distinction is made between male and female athletes. For example, I will soon make further arrangements for Dutch top athletes to receive financial support in the future. In awarding allowances to athletes, the government will treat everyone equally. That applies to both men and women, but, to give an example of a different kind, also to disabled athletes.

As State Secretary for Sport, I already ask sports federations to provide me with a list of male and female committee members. I do so to monitor the progress being made, but also to make the sports organization more keenly aware of the disadvantaged position still occupied by women at managerial level. Moreover this information can be used to set targets for the number of women sports administrators.

In addition, we are now looking into the practical problems and stereotypes that are hampering the efforts of women to work their way up in sports organizations and thus reach the higher echelons. This study will be completed in the near future and should produce a number of recommendations.

We also need to remove a number of obstacles and wrongs in our society that are holding back women in sport. A case in point is sexual harassment in sport. Together with the national organization NOC\*NSF, I am clamping down on this problem as much as possible. To raise awareness of sexual harassment we are carrying out an information campaign directed at the sports clubs. Also, we are now setting up a bureau to register complaints and to then follow up on those complaints.

Moreover, I give my whole-hearted backing to initiatives taken by female sports administrators and athletes. A good example is the National Network for Women in Sport.

We still have a long way to go. Female sports administrators and athletes should assume much of the responsibility.

Likewise, sports organizations must redouble their efforts, and governments cannot stand idly by. Whenever possible, governments should help to move this process forward.

Indeed, the Dutch women in top sports expect me to make full use of my prominent position, and I intend to do just that. I am convinced that if we all join forces, the position of women in sport can be substantially improved.

Hopefully, we will see each other again in ten years and will be able to look back with great satisfaction at all the progress that has been made.

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