

# History

## WOMEN AT THE OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES

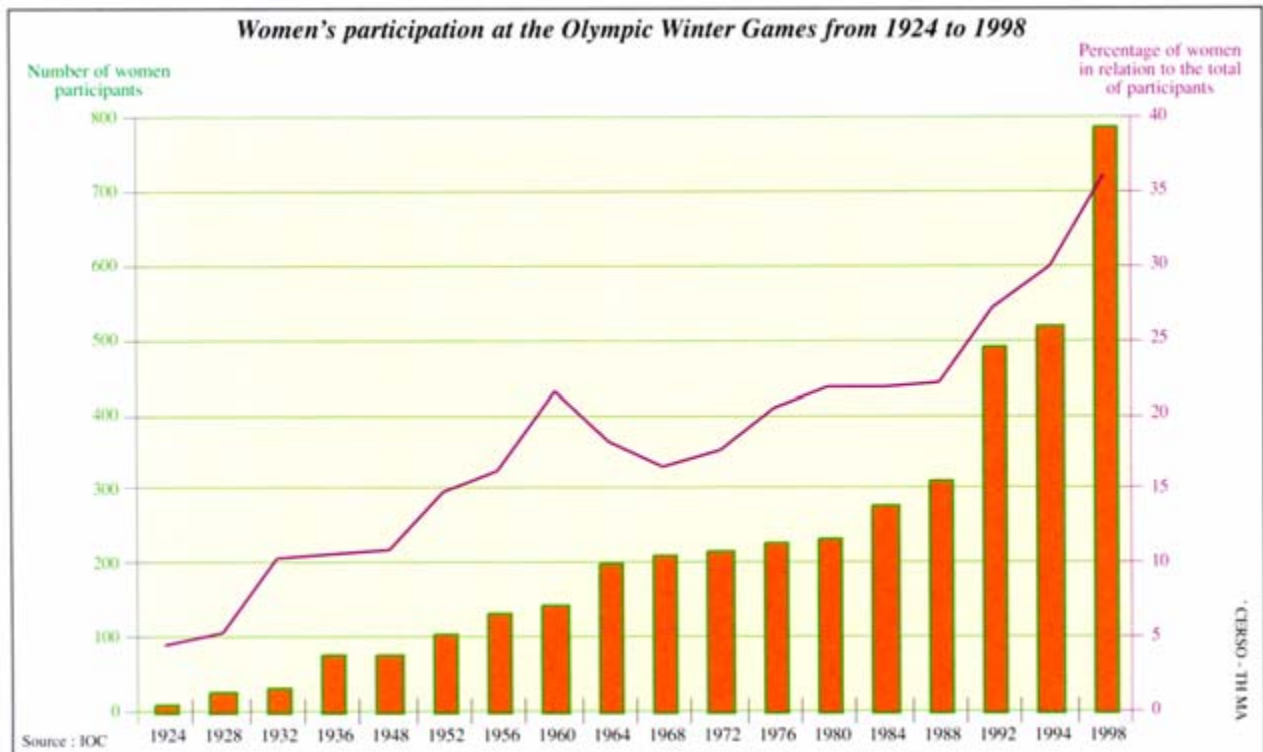
While women have always been present at the Olympic Winter Games (and from 1900 at the Games of the Olympiad), their participation was accepted reluctantly by everyone. This discrimination was very largely orchestrated by Pierre de Coubertin (but also by certain international sports leaders), who expressed his distrust of women's participation on numerous occasions. Thus misogyny, associated with women's social standing, not popular in many countries, explains to a large part, the small number of women at the first Games.

By Sylvain Adami\*



Two factors encouraged the rise of women's participation: the arrival of large delegations from socialist countries, and the development of the feminist movements in the

1960s and 70s. However, this phenomenon is far less applicable for the Games of the Olympiad than for the Winter Games. Indeed, women only represented 12% of all the athletes present in Mexico City in 1968, while they accounted for about 17% of the participants at the Winter Games in Grenoble the same year. The main reason for this difference seems to stem from the types of NOC participating in the Olympic Winter Games, which are, mainly, from developed countries (Western or socialist). Conversely, the Games of the Olympiad have a much more universal calling and welcome



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nearly all the countries of the world. For a long time, women's sport has been, and seldom still is practised in a great number of developing nations.

## Ever-increasing participation

The number of women at the Olympic Winter Games has continued to progress (cf. table below). This progression was fairly steady until 1988, before a first 'boom' in 1992, followed by another bigger one in 1998. These two last increases are partly explained by the progression of all the participants, but especially by the addition of new sports and disciplines. Thus, the great increase in women's participation from the Games of 1988 to



*Ice skater Szabo Herma, Olympic champion in Chamonix in 1924.*

those of 1992 corresponds to the addition of biathlon, short track speed skating as well as freestyle skiing. In the same way, the increase in 1998 followed the introduction of snowboarding, curling, and especially ice hockey, a sport where the number of athletes is large. From 4% at the first Olympic Winter Games, the proportion of women

reached nearly 36.2% of the total number of competitors in 1998. The "peak" of 1960 underlines the development of women's sport in North America, as well as the increasingly important social position occupied by women at this time (thanks to the growth of feminist movements). This great increase is also due to the location of the Squaw Valley Games (smaller European delegations), but also to the absence of the bobsleigh event, a sport contested by many male athletes.

How far will the evolution of women's participation in the Olympic Winter Games go? Salt Lake City may provide us with the beginning of the answer. At the XIX Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City, the programme will be almost equal for women and men. Women will be able to compete in all the sports on the programme and in 37 events of the 44 on the programme (i.e. 47.4%). The bobsleigh will be open to women for the first time and there will also be five new women's events. The number of women's curling and hockey teams will increase from eight to ten.

## NOC participation: "Eurocentrism" of the Olympic Winter Games

The US and Canadian NOCs are those that have sent the greatest number of athletes to participate in the Olympic Winter Games (both men and women). However, the biggest group of participants is centred around the Alpine countries (including the extension of the Alps. the Carpathians). The Scandinavian countries, forerunners in the practice of winter



*Anfisa Reztsova, Olympic biathlon champion in Albertville in 1992.*

sports, represent the third major zone of participants. Finally, some secondary regions, such as the ex-USSR, Great Britain and the Far East (mainly Japan) also exist. Globally-speaking, the NOCs that have sent the most participants to the Olympic Winter Games are situated in the northern hemisphere, at a high latitude (in general between the 40th and the 70th parallels), have a temperate climate and a developed economy (capitalist or socialist). If one looks at the geographic whole, practically three-quarters of the participants (73.7%) in the Olympic Winter Games from 1924 to 1998 come from Europe. Nevertheless, this European predominance is less pronounced for women. Indeed, Europe represents 69% of all female athletes (against 75% for men). This smaller proportion is mainly due to the Scandinavian countries' low participation (11.7% of the women

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against 15.6% of the men). The high rate of women's participation from the USSR, and the Republics that resulted from its break-up, should also be noted.

Only North America, with 14.9% of the total participants, seems to have intervened in this largely European competition (with a very high level of women's participation as it represents 18% of the women's total). Asia and Oceania with 9.3%, South America with 1.9% and especially Africa, with only 0.2% of the participants, are very poorly represented in relation to the size of their populations. Asia is the exception, however, due to high female participation (11.7% of the total), particularly at the Nagano Games, thanks to countries such as China, the two Koreas or even Japan.

## Athletes separated by discipline: NOCs' characteristics

Even though the large winter Olympic nations compete in all the



Lidiya Skoblikova, six-time Olympic speed skating champion.

disciplines of the Games, there are sometimes many differences between the NOCs as regards athletes' disciplines.

Thus, the Far Eastern countries are noticeable for a high level of participation in skating (mainly speed skating). Other countries, such as the US, Canada, the former USSR (now the Russian Federation), and Germany, also enter a high proportion of their delegations in this discipline, but with a relatively equal split between the figure and speed skating events.

The Alpine countries are well represented in the Alpine disciplines, while Eastern European countries, as well as the three Scandinavian countries, are more geared towards the Nordic disciplines. Participation in the luge event is concentrated mainly in three countries: Germany, Austria and Italy, although several others countries (the US, Canada, Poland, the former Czechoslovakia, Romania, the former USSR and Japan) also participate in luge.

A great majority of small nations (that, on the whole, send small delegations) participate in Alpine skiing. Indeed, this sport is to the Olympic Winter Games what athletics is to the Games of the Olympiad. Its media perception means that many NOCs enter their athletes even if they are not at the very highest level.

## Women's medal at the Olympic Winter Games: "specialised" NOCs

The distribution of medals by discipline at the Olympic Winter Games from 1924 to 1998 reveals a certain specialisation of the NOCs (those which have won medals, in general

in two or three disciplines for the most successful) which is a result of several factors.

## Specialisation factors

The most important factor is historical and cultural. Thus, a high number of cross country skiing medals are won by the USSR and the Scandinavian countries, Alpine skiing medals by the Alpine countries, or again speed skating medals by the Netherlands. Other factors that are less obvious, seem however to have influenced this specialisation phenomena. The economic factor seems significant in Western countries. The French Alpine skiing medals were highly sought after at the Olympic Games in Grenoble in 1968 by the French companies dealing in winter sports products (they had invested heavily in the preparation of the French Alpine skiing team, creating the famous "Pool France"). A gold medal in Alpine skiing was much more valuable to these companies than several gold medals in speed skating. Every medal seems to have a price but it differs from country to country, as each has different practices. A cross-country medal is more important for a Scandinavian than an Alpine skiing medal, because cross-country skiing is much more widespread and is more interesting in economic circles.

Certain sports are more popular than others in terms of media coverage and money. Many more people know of Katarina Witt's feats in figure skating (two gold medals in 1984 in Sarajevo and in 1988 in Calgary), but how many people remember Lidiya Skoblikova's six gold medals in speed skating in

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1960 in Squaw Valley and in 1964 in Innsbruck, or, more recently, Ljubow Jegorowa's six gold and three silver medals in cross-country skiing in 1992 in Albertville and in 1994 in Lillehammer?

The political factor also seems to be influential, notably in certain socialist countries; the glory of winning the highest number of medals serving as ideological legitimisation. Now, it seems easier to win medals in certain disciplines than in others. But medals in luge or in speed skating have very little impact, in practical terms, in the Eastern countries. The importance of a medal varies completely according to the country, the discipline, and the benefits one can reap (economic, ideological etc.). A medal, in the same way as participation, is also a sign of international recognition. The Far Eastern countries, as well as those deriving from the break-up of the Eastern Bloc, seem to have understood this principle perfectly. One can now understand a country's efforts, according to the interests that they seek, to invest in a particular discipline. Can one State, through promoting and encouraging the practice of a discipline, by installing and developing facilities, manage to create a competitive and successful elite, capable of winning medals? To what degree can intervention by the State, or federations... generate a winning formula?

## *The specific characteristics of each country*

The North American countries are noticeable for their clear preference for ice sports. Thus Canada and the US have won 63.9% and 69.3%, respectively, of their medals in these

sports. This specialisation seems to result from a certain tradition of practising these disciplines, but also from the North-Americans' craze for sports that can produce urban professional shows such as ice hockey and figure skating ("Holiday on Ice" style shows). Success in Alpine skiing by these two countries should also be highlighted. However, these pleasing results do not seem to be due to tradition, but a will to develop this key discipline of the Games (on a media level and therefore on a financial level).

The Scandinavian countries and the USSR have won their highest number of medals in cross country skiing (more than 50% of their total). This is especially thanks to Finland,

which specialises in the discipline (more than three quarters of its medals). Cross country skiing has been practised for a long time by a great number of Scandinavians. On the other hand, the USSR is noticeable for its excellent results in skating, not only figure skating (particularly in the mixed events that it dominated), but also in the speed events, particularly in the 1960's and 70's.

Western Europe is more diverse. The three main Alpine countries (Austria, Switzerland and France) are characterised by a very strong specialisation in Alpine skiing. Italy also achieves pleasing results in Alpine skiing. but also in cross country skiing. Germany has partic-



*Christi Cranz, gold medalist in the combined in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in 1936.*

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ular characteristics in relation to the other Alpine countries. As well as the Alpine skiing medals won by Germany and the FRG (the GDR not being able to excel easily in this discipline on account of its geography), the three German NOCs have won, at the Games, many medals in luge and skating (figure and speed). The high number of medals won by the GDR (and by the reunified German team at the last Games, which, except for Alpine skiing, include a great majority of athletes coming from the GDR's former sports system) seems to result from political will. More than a tradition of practising these disciplines before the division of Germany, this country seems to have deliberately invested in certain disciplines (that were never or hardly ever practised before the creation of the GDR) in order to bring home the greatest number of medals at the lowest possible "production cost".

Finally, the Far Eastern countries' strong specialisation in skating, mainly speed, with some medals also won recently for freestyle skiing, should also be noted.

## Conclusion

Women are, at present, an essential part of the Olympic Winter Games (the women's figure skating event is more popular than the men's). While the parity between men and women is still not complete, the different IOC policies (encouragement of women's practice, introduction of new events) tend increasingly in this direction. As with men, women's participation involves only a few countries in the world, mainly in Europe. The nature of the events at the Olympic Winter



*Women's ice hockey match (China-Canada) in Nagano in 1998.*

Games (snow and ice sports) indeed considerably limits the universality of this competition. The end of the century will have seen, however, the emergence of certain nations (in Asia particularly), as much in terms of participation as medals. The competition among women indeed seems lower than among the men, notably in the disciplines recently added to the programme of the Games. Nevertheless, the traditional large winter sports nations are still very much around, sharing the medals "cake" among themselves according to their own propensities.

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This text is part of a series of four studies analysing women's participation at major sports events and, in particular, at the Olympic Games, conducted by CERSO on the occasion of the 2nd World Conference on Women and Sport, held in Paris in March 2000, in the framework of the agreement signed in 1999 between the French National Olympic Committee, the University of Franche-Comte and the IOC. The general aim of the agreement is to promote, at university level, research into Olympic sports and more generally very much into the Olympic Movement. With the support of the IOC's Olympic Studies Centre, it provides the opportunity for studies led by academics and the communication of results in the form of publications, symposia or seminars.