
Women's Entry into the Olympic Games in the Twentieth Century

by

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This paper, which provides an alternative viewpoint in the examination of the Olympic Games, has as its central theme the early struggle of women for acceptance as Olympic athletes. It encompasses only Pierre de Coubertin's term as President of the IOC, 1896-1925.

Pierre de Coubertin's primary motive for re-establishing the Olympic Games was renewed French influence abroad and a "spiritual renewal" at home. This revival was launched during a period of social and political upheaval, the 1890's. Coubertin believed the powers of French regeneration resided in the development of a superior class of athletes devoted to moral strength and character, which in turn would provide national stability. Women, not valued as people who could effect desired change, were not included in Coubertin's scheme.

Nevertheless, women wished to compete from the beginning. In 1900 they entered the tennis and golf competitions, although the manner in which they gained entry was questionable. The political frenzy following the Dreyfus trial prompted the French government to dissolve Coubertin's organizing committee and awarded administration of the Games to the Exposition Committee (Exposition of Paris, 1900). It is probable that the disorganized way in which the competitions were administered and the sideshow atmosphere favored the inclusion of women in the Olympic Games of 1900.

Golf and tennis events were not open to women in 1904, although they were on the program for men. James E. Sullivan, Chairman of the Organizing Committee and Executive Secretary of the AAU of the U.S. opposed allowing women to compete. Until his death in 1914, he effectively barred women swimmers from registration by the AAU. Without registration, American women could not compete in Olympic swimming competitions of 1912.

The appearance of women in demonstrations of gymnastics, swimming and diving favorably affected some members of the IOC. When the Swedish Committee did not propose events for women in 1912, the IOC asked for women's competitions in tennis and swimming. Considering his opposition to the admission of women, one concludes that Coubertin could not assert his will strongly enough to defeat the proposal.

Prompted by the growing insurgency of women into the Olympic Games, with the approval of the IOC and certain federations, Coubertin sought to force legislation on the issue. He hoped the Congress of Paris (1914) would resolve the problem definitively. Although nothing was ever made public regarding the decisions taken at that Congress, evidence indicates that all seventeen countries attending voted to allow competitions, with the exception of France (Coubertin) and the United States (Sullivan).

There is little doubt that the growing independence of women and their desire for social equality after World War I was a factor in the negative position sports establishments took against the increasing participation of women in the Olympic Games. Women athletes and Olympic competitors alike linked participation in sports with women suffrage and social freedom. The IAAF and the IOC refused to consider the admission of women to track and field events in 1920 and 1924 despite strong pleas from women in the sporting world. Contrarily, the IOC voted against Coubertin's proposal to eliminate women from the Olympic program.

Throughout Pierre de Coubertin's presidency the IOC occupied itself with discussions of the feminist movement. It suggested that federations control women's sports in order to direct their activities in appropriate paths. This move, in effect, was intended to limit women's competition.

Even after Coubertin concluded his term as president, the inclusion of women in the Olympic Games regularly came into question. Progress came only as a result of continuous struggle against the views of the sports establishments, public opinion, the biases of sports reporters, and the personal conditioning which demanded conformity to existing social models of femininity.



Leona Holbrook spoke on Women's Sport in America