

The Development of the American Woman Olympic Kayaker

by

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Unique and relatively unknown, the woman Olympic kayaker is a product of time, culture and her own special breed of woman; superior athletes who have achieved in sports designed by men, for men's bodies.

Kayaking was studied for several reasons: Women's seemingly nonexistent participation level; it easily compares women sporting for social means only; adapts itself to possibly the most adventurous and self-sufficient sortswomen; allows us to view women in relation to nature; it is a sport with easily defined goals; the previous athletic ability of swimming is required; the basic use of upper body strength is prevalent, historically taboo for women's social image; and its Olympic applications.

Women's basic relationship with the kayak paralleled the boat's creative birth within the Eskimo Culture, through the use of a larger, more cumbersome boat, the "Unimak." To this day however, the existence of the peoples who produced the essential form for what is now an Olympic sport, still demands an entirely different use of women's ability toward its function. That is, only to view the kayak in the presence of man and his need of the craft for livelihood.

As the kayak was introduced to America through the eyes of man, women were still involved in social battles. Not until the Industrial Revolution, along with the outbreak of the Civil War did women gain a new-found respect and status, both mentally and physically. Strange as it may seem, the bicycle craze of 1896, had a profound effect on the advancements of women kayakers. This important step was due to the change in style of clothing caused by the increased physical movement in cycling, which transferred to the revival and ease of swimming; a prerequisite to kayaking.

By 1899, ladies who were practical canoeists were eligible for "Associate Membership" only, to the American Canoe Association. From this recreational base, private clubs and educational institutions transported the sport safely and quietly through ongoing social stigmas set for women.

Although American women were not included in kayaking's initial showing at the 8th Olympiad, the sport evolved for women because of two sisters, and an attitude of "we can do better than that." Marcia Jones Smoke and her sister, Sperry Jones Rademaker, in Rome at the 1960 Olympics, participating in track and field and swimming, saw for the first occasion women's kayaking. They wasted no time by returning to the 1964 Olympics and seizing the first and last medals ever obtained by United States women.

Why the last medals in 1964? Two main conflicts exist; that of the percentage of women actually participating, as well as the ever-existent dealings with our government regarding financial situations resulting from our facade for the morality of the United States, the "Amateur Athlete."

The development of the American woman Olympic kayaker has been sporadic, slow, and relatively gone unnoticed. Yet, this sport so well mirrors women's social acceptance, its direct effect upon women in athletics, athletics for women, as well as the unshelved problems of Olympicism. The continuance of kayaking's development is now in the hands of a new historical chapter; women's personal and political pursuance. For now that one can visualize the history which has established the rightness of woman's desire to apply her talents to adventurous athletic endeavours, the women involved must now look upon this open invitation to research this area as one cut in the crystal of Olympic reform.