

## Women and the Olympic Games

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### ABSTRACT

The Olympic Games, which were founded again in 1894 by Coubertin as a celebration of virility, were reserved for male athletes. Women were admitted in 1900 as participants in sports that were considered to be compatible with their femininity and fragility, but were excluded from the showpiece events of track and field. On the initiative of the Frenchwoman Alice Milliat and the International Women's Sports Federation (FSFI), a power struggle began with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Women's Olympiads were organized from 1922 to 1934 in an effort to force the committee to yield. The Olympics slowly became feminized, although gender imbalance was dominant throughout the twentieth century, including in the IOC. To combat the effects of gender, the Olympic charter has made the presence of women mandatory in every sport since 2007. In 2014, the European Commission defended equality in sport, and the IOC added gender parity to the 2020 Olympics agenda.



Suzanne Lenglen, the “diva of tennis,” or the emancipation of the woman’s body through sport, 1923.



The 800 meters, which had just been opened to women and was won by Lina Radke in 1928 (on the right in the photograph), was forbidden to them until 1960 because it was considered unsuitable for women's physical condition.

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1894: the French baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) refounded the Olympic Games during a congress at the Sorbonne as a hymn to virility, a union of "brawn and brains" of which only men were supposed to be capable. There was therefore no need to formally exclude feminine athletes, because their absence went without saying: they were not thought of, because they were unthinkable. The first games were held in 1896 without them, to their great discontent. Despite the misogynous opposition of its founder, which was widespread throughout Europe, the 1900 Paris Games included 22 women (French, Belgian, Italian, Russian, etc.) out of 997 participants, with each gender competing separately. The British tennis player Charlotte Cooper (1870-1966) was the first woman to win a gold medal. Participation was nonetheless limited to so-called feminine sports, the former leisure activities of the aristocracy (tennis, sailing, croquet, horseriding, figure skating); these protected femininity and fertility, but also respected decency and avoided any kind of strenuous or sustained effort, a requirement that was incompatible with high-level sports. The world champion for figure skating, the Briton Madge Syers (1881-1917), was thus wearing a skirt that ran to her mid-calf when she was awarded the individual gold medal and the bronze couples medal (with her husband) in London in 1908. Her compatriots also distinguished themselves, notably the archer Queenie Newall (1854-1929), who finished first among 25 participants from Britain, France, and the United States. Despite popular fervour, the organizers of the Olympic games still limited feminine presence. In 1917 this injustice became the struggle of Alice Milliat (1899-1938), the pioneering rower who was the president of the women's sports centre Femina sport (1912), as well as treasurer of the Fédération française du sport féminin (1917). She called for the admittance of female athletes to all Olympic sports, pointing out that the role played by women during World War One invalidated the argument of "natural fragility" advanced by their opponents. In 1919, the

International Olympic Committee (IOC), which consisted entirely of men, refused the feminization of the showpiece events of track and field during the Antwerp games. That year the press rejoiced less about the gold medal won by the skater Magda Julin (1894-1990) than the Swede's "long black velvet dress, brightened by a white collar." Major figures emerged nevertheless, such as the Frenchwoman Suzanne Lenglen (1899-1938), who was nicknamed the "diva of tennis."

The tenacious Alice Milliat, who was in contact with other European female athletes, founded the International Women's Sports Federation (FSFI) in 1921. In 1922 in Paris, this indefatigable militant reanimated the Women's Olympic Games, founded by sixteen women in the sixth century BC as the Hera Games. The 77 female athletes primarily represented Great Britain, Switzerland, Italy, Norway, and France. The Briton Mary Lines (1893-1973) distinguished herself in the sprint and high jump with three gold medals, two silver, and one bronze. Following the virulent reaction of the president of the International Association of Athletics Federations, the Swede Johannes Sigfrid Edström (1870-1964), Alice Milliat conceded to replacing the adjective "Olympic" with "World." Whereas during the 1924 games women were limited to a few sports, and numbered just 13 against 245 men, at the Women's World Games in Gothenburg female swimmers, tennis players, fencers, discus throwers, and other athletes paraded on August 27, 1926, behind the flags of ten nations and to the applause of 8,000 spectators. The performance of the Pole Halina Konopacka (1900-1989) at the discus throw was especially noted (37.71 metres), as was that of the Frenchwoman Marguerite Radideau (1907-1978) during the 100-yard sprint, which she ran in 12 seconds. These brilliant results, coupled with Coubertin's departure from the IOC in 1925, enabled the genuine entry of female athletes in the Olympic arena during the 1928 summer games. In Amsterdam, female athletes competed for the first time in the 100 metres, 400 metres, 800 metres, and high jump. That same year, the Soviet Union, which had always refused to take part in the Olympic games, created its "proletarian" equivalent in Moscow known as the Spartiakade, which was open to women. Although European feminists generally called for women's unrestricted practice of sports and Olympic participation on a secondary basis, Englishwomen boycotted the competition that year when faced with the anti-feminist reservations of the new president, the Belgian Henri de Baillet-Latour (1876-1942), and with the endless criticism from the sporting world and the press. The latter humiliated the recordholder of the 800 metres, the German Karoline Radke-Batschauer, known as Lina Radke (1903-1983), who was criticized for winning without grace alongside a group of "poor women" who could not attain the required level due to their fragile constitution and lack of training.

In the face of this "appalling spectacle"—which was contradicted by the filmed version of the race—the IOC forbade this sport to female athletes until 1960. Convinced that the IOC wanted to control women's sports, the FSFI once again organized games in 1930 in Prague; their sporting and media success forced the IOC to propose reforms, but on the condition that the women's games cease. The FSFI responded by demanding the expulsion of women from the Olympics so that they could dedicate themselves to the Women's Olympiad, which included "all forms of women's sporting activities." In the face of another refusal, the last women's games took place in London in 1934. The withdrawal of Milliat for health reasons, along with the evolution of mentalities and the spread of women's sport, gradually weakened resistance. The feminization of the Olympics continued slowly (13% in Tokyo in 1964, 23% in Los Angeles in 1984), and drew support from the participation of Soviet women beginning in 1952, the same year that horseriding became a mixed individual event. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s, following directives from the United Nations affirming that sport was favourable for health and the disappearance of sexist stereotypes, that the presence of women at the Olympics was encouraged. Nevertheless, the share for each sport still reflected gendered prejudices: until 1980, skiing had the largest number of female members, surpassed at the time by tennis, which made its return to the Olympics after being absent since 1924; in 1990, track and field was only in tenth place, while equestrian sports held their position in fourth place. Since 1991, however, every new sport at the Olympics must include a women's event; in 2012, the London games were 44% feminine.

The effects of gender have also always been present in the composition of the IOC: exclusively masculine until 1981, it retained a male majority until the end of the century. However, since 2007 the Olympic Charter has

affirmed that: “The IOC’s role is to encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures with a view to implementing the principle of equality of men and women” (2015 Olympic Charter, Rule 2, Paragraph 7). The European Union approves of this orientation, which connects with its own: after organizing the Gender equality in sport conference in Vilnius in 2013, the European Commission published in 2014 its Strategic Actions on Gender Equality in Sport. That same year, the 11th recommendation of the IOC (which at the time was one third female) was added to the 2020 Olympic agenda, making gender parity an objective. Men’s request to compete in rhythmic gymnastics and synchronized swimming, which was rejected in 2012, should therefore be reexamined.

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