

AN APPROACH TO FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

José Geraldo Massucato ()
Mário Hata (**)*

ABSTRACT

Women's participation in sports is increasing more and more and has always been connected to cultural factors.

Thus, sports once restricted to men, as long distance running which nowadays has significant female participation, are being more and more incorporated by women.

Several factors, such as politics,

religion and economy, may generally speaking collaborate with or impair sports and consequently female sport.

Our aim is to do away with prejudice deeply inherent to our culture so that women will be able to fully develop within society.

UNITERMS: Women in sports.

OLYMPIC GAMES: A WOMAN'S DREAM?

The world has witnessed the increasing involvement of female participation in sports activities (Barbanti, 1986), particularly in the Olympic Games. From the beginning of this century, a growing female involvement has been noticed in the "Olympic Games"

phenomenon, as depicted in Figure 1.

History has shown us that female participation in sports has always been connected to social and cultural factors.

As well as the evergrowing number of female participants, likewise there has been a quick improvement in their scores. One of the reasons for this female growth in the

world of sports is a strong identification with what can be offered by sports: "Man has many personal needs and works to satisfy such needs" (Lynd, 1939). One who is

engaged in any sports activity, whatever it may be, besides other secondary qualities develops a very close relationship to one's self and to the moment one is living.

Table 1
Performance evolution of male and female participation as related to Modern Age Olympic Games

Olympic Year	Site	Male Participation	Female Participation
1896	Athens	295	--
1900	Paris	1066	11
1904	St. Louis	546	8
1908	London	1998	36
1912	Stockholm	2447	57
1920	Antwerp	2527	64
1924	Paris	2939	136
1928	Amsterdam	2708	263
1932	Los Angeles	1281	127
1936	Berlin	3652	328
1948	London	3677	385
1952	Helsinki	5349	518
1956	Melbourne	2813	371
1960	Rome	4859	537
1964	Tókyo	4854	732
1968	Mexico	5782	844
1972	Munich	8485	1603
1976	Montreal	4915	1274
1980	Moscow	4625	1247
1984	Los Angeles	5458	1620
1988	Seoul		Altogether: over 11 thousand

In many Track and Field and Swimming competitions, the difference between male and female results has been constantly decreasing side by side with female technical level development and the increasing number of women practicing sports.

Picture 1 depicts the comparison

between male and female results up to 1978, and from this period up to 1988, in Track and Field. The same applies to Swimming, exception made to the 800m and 1.500m competitions. Male results leveled to 100%, while "delta" represents the extent (in percentage) of female results as compared to male's.

Picture 1
Ratio of female results as related to males's in absolute values (*)

Track and Field Competitions	up to 1978			up to 1988		
	male	female	delta	male	female	delta
100m	9.95	10.88	90.7%	9.83	10.49	93.9%
200m	19.83	22.06	88.8%	19.72	21.34	91.8%
400m	43.86	48.94	88.4%	43.29	47.60	90.0%
800m	1.43.44	1.54.94	88.9%	1.41.73	1.53.28	88.6%
1500m	3.32.16	3.56.0	88.8%	3.39.46	3.52.47	89.0%
3000m	7.35.2	8.27.12	88.6%	7.32.1	8.22.63	88.8%
10000m	27.22.5	31.45.40	84.0%	27.13.81	30.13.74	89.0%
High Jump	2.33	2.01	86.3%	2.43	2.09	86.0%
Long Jump	8.90	7.09	79.7%	8.90	7.52	84.5%
Shot Put (a)	22.15	22.32	100.8%	23.06	22.63	98.1%
Discus Throw (b)	71.16	70.72	99.4%	74.08	76.80	103.7%
Javelin Throw (c)	94.58	69.32	73.3%	104.80	80.00	76.3%

Swimming Competitions (d)	Crawl			Back		
	male	female	delta	male	female	delta
50m	22.11	24.98	87.0%	—	—	—
100m	48.42	54.73	87.0%	54.51	1.00.59	88.8%
200m	1.47.25	1.57.55	90.4%	1.58.14	2.08.60	91.1%
400m	3.46.95	4.03.85	92.5%	—	—	—
800m	8.15.58	8.47.66	93.5%	—	—	—
1500m	15.31.75	16.33.95	93.3%	—	—	—

(*) Modified of Mellerowicz & Meller, 1979, and Mathews & Fox, 1979.

(a) relation of male/female implement bulk = 1.8.

(b) relation of male/female implement bulk = 2.0.

(c) relation of male/female implement bulk = 1.3.

As of April 1, 1986 new rules for the building of male javelin come into force.

(d) Except for the 800m and 1.500m contests, all results are of up to 1988.

As a rule, female scores, in the running contests, fall further behind as distance increases, as opposed to swimming. In Hurling and Throwing, female's better scores as compared to those of male's can be explained while one observes the relations of implement bulk; as in the case of Javelin Throw, a smaller relation implies in a

smaller delta.

Forseeing how long these differences will keep decreasing at such rate is impossible, as it is impossible to know to what extent biological differences, which so far have kept male predominance in absolute terms in all modalities, will keep registering such predominance.

FEMALE SPORTS SOCIETY

As far back as the Hominidae, both male and female position have been well defined: in those days women were in charge of the harvest whereas men were responsible for hunting and other heavy tasks. Such tradition has remained throughout times.

In the Ancient Olympic Games, women by rule, were forbidden to watch the competitions because they were not regarded as citizens. Except for religious ceremonies, they were so to say, almost totally excluded from public life. As a result, History holds a few blank pages as far as female performance is concerned.

Woman's first participation in the Olympic Games took place in 1900 (see Table 1). From then on, women's participation has steadily increased, standing out in the world of sports. The first female Marathon took place in 1984, not to mention that in one of the Ancient Olympic Games a woman dressed herself as a man so as to be able to take part in that event. From this fact we gather that there will always be people ahead of their time. Falsely keeping women away from long demanding activities may be related to the cautious attitude of the International Olympic Committee. It is known that many non Olympic long demanding activities had already been promoted.

Many sports activities, previously restricted to men, such as triple jump, are now being incorporated by women, in spite of the recommendation that they should be avoided, due to the drastic work out demanded for its performance (Pini, 1978). Some of these activities still have a small number of participants as opposed to others (long distance running, for instance), which show a larger number of followers.

According to Pini, 1978, a woman can take part in all sports features performed by men; it remains to be seen if she should do it.

Women's participation in sports has always depended on the social, political and economical system of each country and has therefore sometimes been delayed. In some parts of the world, women still maintain their traditional roles, and their participation in

sports is regarded as inconvenient and cumbersome.

CULTURAL EMBRYO FOR SPORTS ACTIVITY

From early age, girls are not properly stimulated and many times are kept from participating in more aggressive and athletic play, largely offered to boys. Thus, they miss the opportunity of getting to know and developing their potentialities. Oberteuffer & Ulrich, 1977, state that: "When a child plays, he not only expresses all that goes within himself, but he also reflects the cultural patterns he is surrounded by and reveals his ambitions, hopes and interests, as well as happiness, excitement or disappointment"

Most of the time, boys are given balls or war toys to play with, which offer them excellent opportunities for integration into physical activities, while girls entertain themselves with dolls and "passive" toys. As a result, boys are more active and obtain leadership through physical force, while girls dedicate themselves to handiwork and are praised for their verbal activity.

RUNNING STARTS SLOWLY

Society takes a long time to assimilate and accept new phenomena and this is particularly true at the beginning of the process. Such delay is in straight connection with time.

From the 70's on, road running became worldwide accepted, it was a "fad" There was an increasing number of people, of all kinds, engaged in this activity: the weekend type, those following medical advice, the ones who accepted a friend's invitation, those influenced by media and many more for all sorts of reasons.

Almost two decades later, the eyes of society get used to seeing people jogging through streets and parks, at any time of the day.

THE BRAZILIAN WOMAN'S PERFORMANCE

In Brazil, women's participation in sports is not much approved of. During the dictatorial period, for instance, the

government tried to hinder women from practicing martial arts – Judo. In accordance to the ideology of the time, this decision was taken without any previous consultation with the people concerned or with experts. Such attitude seems to have delayed women's development as far as Judo is concerned as opposed to men's who have obtained significant international scores.

Although a partial increase in women's participation in sports in Brazil has been noted, it is still looked upon with great prejudice, and no scientific support. There is much concern on the part of parents and boyfriends as to women's masculine look. Conversely, sport plays an important role in the reassurance of values that will enable women to reach personal accomplishment and a feeling of fulfilment.

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO

A survey on women's social and cultural attitudes in sports, at the University of São Paulo, made by Hata in 1988, reported that 88% of the women taking sports, particularly track and field, claimed to recognize positive values to the practice of sports and a mere 12% attributed both negative and positive values to it.

The reasons claimed by them to account for their participation range from mere behaviour attitudes to social ideals: the need for multiple and specific knowledge of the subject matter, sociability, development of moral qualities as objectivity, perseverance, responsibility, self control which contribute for selfknowledge, among other things.

"Accomplishment of the task itself and the sheer feeling of the 'I can make it' is significant to one's self knowledge. ... development, modification and changing of personality take place when man meets the demands of the situations he is surrounded by and when he totally interacts as a complete individual in such situations" (Oberteuffer & Ulrich, 1977).

Why do they prefer to do long distance running? Due to time availability; autonomy of place, company and specific material, to the way of expressing themselves (pleasure, personal satisfaction, own will, developing attitudes of dedication, concentration,

meeting challenges). Besides, one can always improve one's "social status", accomplish pre-established goals, overcome personal limits through will power. Given sports situations may lead to the awareness of human possibilities and limits, learning to collaborate, participate, compete, and assess one's actual condition.

Jones and Bailey, 1950, corroborate that "when individuals gain 'status' within their own group due to perfect performance of tasks assessed by the group itself, these individuals become friendlier, less apprehensive and more self confident" As far as sports initiation time is concerned, our school structure for the development of physical activities is unfortunately rather poor: just 20% of those college students interviewed had started a more systematic sports practice during their junior high school years; 40% in senior high school and another 40% only at College. Their main incentivators had been their own physical education teachers (44%), their friends (31%) and other stimuli such as motivating themselves after a hard exam to enter University, or through the incentive of a coach, a sibling or a parent (25%).

As opposed to the results found at the University of São Paulo, it is emphasized that the first and outstanding contact with sports takes place in childhood, the family playing an important role in this involvement (Oberteuffer & Ulrich, 1977).

Currently, in spite of the delayed contact of the interviewed students with sports, it stands out as something important in their lives and its positive effects still last, as "learning to overcome daily life adversities" and "I've got to make it"

According to 38% of the interviewed girls, sports engagement brings forth great enthusiasm, stimulates competition, provides a better preparation, and helps making objective decisions such as "going to the very end of it" to reach personal accomplishment, within consonant relationship with other people.

CONCLUSION

In brief, having in mind the above mentioned considerations, female sports phenomenon is one of the positive results of the development and transformation of

today's human society. More and more, physical activities are being incorporated as means of expression, in the same way that new international scores are established as limits of specialization of privileged human beings, where women's performance is felt.

In a way, several social, political and economical factors account for or impair sports and consequently female sport. Cultural evolution will not be a positive determinant until these factors are in tune with the purpose. In the complexity of the matter, with constant change in the world situation, cultural development may be adequate for one country but not necessarily for another one.

Thus, we do hope that sports engagement becomes a healthy habit, that there be an awareness of its role and

importance; that it may not be a redundant, minor activity; that in the soccer country, there may be as many followers of other sports features; that sport as a priority factor and through a sound basic work may contribute to education.

We also hope that in spite of all prejudice regarding woman in sport, we may successfully change this situation.

(*) Full Professor – Department of
Gymnastics of the School of Physical
Education at the University of São Paulo.

(**) Instructor of the Department of
Technical Sports of the School of
Physical Education at the University of
São Paulo.