

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN SPORT THROUGH HISTORY OF OLYMPIC GAMES

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“A woman stands as a gate at the exit but also at the entrance of this world”¹

Ivo Andrić

Introduction

Today in the most developed cultures still there is deeply rooted belief that competitive spirit and muscular body destroy womanhood i.e. that women do not need quality such as endurance, strength and courage. Because of this imposed stereotypes regarding gentle femininity, many women think that participate in sport activities simply does not become to them and the physical activity is not necessary in their lives.

Limited participation of women in sport has different causes starting with tradition, conservative consciousness, traditional patterns, prejudices, stereotypes as well as understanding sport as “a male business”.

Through major part of human history, athletic competitions were viewed exclusively as a male business. At the ancient times only warriors participated in athletic competitions to prove their courage necessary for fight or to show their sexual maturity in some other way. This exclusivity of male participation in competitive sports was transferred into the Ancient Olympic Games where women were not allowed to watch, let alone to participate in competitions. However, over the time a special athletic event for women was developed, Herean Games.

Herean Games

The ancient Herean games, devoted to the Goddess Hera, were the first recorded athletic competition for women that took part at the stadium in Olympia, most probably in the Olympic year before the male competitions. They were held for the first time in 6th BC. According to some texts, including Pausanias’s description of Greece (175 AD), Hippodamia gathered a group known as “16 women” (there are several interpretations, including the one saying that the group consisted of the women chosen to be the negotiators from 16 towns in order to establish peace between Elis and Pisa) who promoted the Herean games as a sign of appreciation because of Hippodamias marriage to Pelops. The other texts have shown that “16 women” created peace between Pisa and Elis, and because their responsibilities in the political field, they were promoted to be administrators of Herean games.

As in the male competition at the beginning the Herean games consisted only of races. The female winners were given a crown made of olive leaves, the meat of a cow or an ox of the animals’ sacrificed in the honor of Hera. The winners were also given the right to present the statues with carved names as well to display their portraits on columns of Hera’s temple. It is still clearly visible where the portraits used to be in the temple though the works of art themselves have disappeared.

Women competed within three age groups, at the track of the Olympic stadium which was 5/6 length of the track men used to run. Pausanias described how they looked before the race: *their hair let down, their tunics reaching almost the knees with the right shoulder uncovered almost the breasts.*²

Though the men competed naked while women were dressed, that particular tunica was a kind of clothes worn by men while doing tiring manual labor. Thus, the female competitors were dressed like men. Are we allowed to conclude something about the position of women and the society of that time, though the Herean games existed? We do know that women were forbidden to compete. They were not even allowed to watch the ancient Olympic Games; otherwise they would be thrown from

Andrić, I. (1932). p.14.

² Pausanija (1994). V, 16, p. 398

the cliff of Tipaion mountain. Young girls were not encouraged to become athletes, with the exception of those growing up in Sparta. The Spartan girls were trained in the same athletic events as boys because the Spartans believed that strong women would create strong future warriors. Those Spartan girls were single and competed naked or wearing short dresses. The boys could observe the female competitions hoping to choose a girl to marry and create posterity. The race dedicated to Dionisius (the God of wine and pleasure) was probably connected with a special ritual of the community. The ritual of transition was the one signifying evolution of a person from one status to another. It was universal phenomena which could show hierarchy, values and beliefs which were important in certain cultures. The rituals of transition were usually festivities connected to turning points of puberty, becoming of age, marriage and death.

The Herean games could also be the sign of changes regarding social conditions and alleviation of limits imposed on women. They could also signify a temporal change. Greek women were allowed to compete at the same events as men after the classical period had ended. The lack of references is the evidence that those changes were not kindly observed because they had been carried out due to the Roman influence. In Rome, girls from rich families could participate in male events.

The Herean games were inspired by great popularity of the Olympic Games. The best known ancient Greek female athletes were Cinisca and Belistiche.³

Cinisca was born in 440 BC and was the princess of Sparta. She was the first woman to become the winner in the history of the Ancient Olympic Games. She was the daughter of Eurypontid and sister of Agesilaus II, who later became the king of Sparta. She was said to be mannish woman, an expert in horse races, she was very rich and had perfect qualifications to be successful coach. She was extremely ambitious to succeed in the Olympic Games and was the first woman to grow pedigreed horses and thanks to them she won the prestigious award at the Olympic Games. Her name in the old Greek meant a female puppy.

Belistiche was a hetaera but her origine has been obscured in time. She was said to be Macedonian or to come from Agiva or even to be a slave from a distant country, bought at the market. She won in two horse races at the Olympic Games in 264 BC.

The Olympic Games

While the majority of women in the ancient Greek world were forbidden to the any kind of athletic skills, such as horse ride or hunting, the Spartan women on the contrary, were thought these skills from an early age, at the boarding schools, similar to those attended by Spartan boys.

All the participants of the Ancient Olympic Games were men, while women were not allowed to be at the main stadium in Olympia where all sport events were held. Women could be present at the horse racing events in the capacity of an owner or a coach, they were never allowed to display their skills.

The only woman allowed to be at the festivities was the priestess of Demeter Chamina. Any break of this rule would be followed by death penalty, carried out by throwing an offender from Tipaion mountain. However, according to Pausanias not one case of such a punishment (throwing the women from that high mountain) had been recorded. That every rule had its exceptions was proved by Calyptas. She was there, in the capacity of coach, at her son Pisirodus's wrestling competition, at the Ancient Olympic Games in 396 BC. She got to the stadium in disguise. But, when her son won, typically for a mother, she could not pretend, but ran toward him and revealed herself. Being, through her family, connected to previous famous Olympic winners, she was pardoned. But from that moment on all the competitors and their coaches had to enter the stadium naked.⁴

³Šiljak, V. (2007). p. 174.

⁴Šiljak, V., Fragiadaki, G. (2010). p.155.

The earlier mentioned Cinisca had an important role in the male competitions as the owner of horses and coach of horse racing teams. Her teams entered the Olympic Games and won two times in the four-horse-chariot race (tethrippon) in 396 BC and again in 392 BC. According to Xenophon⁵, Cinisca was encouraged to race horses and take part in competitions by her brother Agesilaus II who actually, by doing that, tried to discredit that sport. He considered the success in chariot races as the victory without value which only reflected the wealth and the skill of horse owner. He believed that in other events a man, his courage and virtues were decisive factors. Agesilaus II hoped that the victory of woman would make the horse racing less manly, but that event did not decrease the engagement of rich Spartans. There were other versions regarding the Agiselaus II's motive to induce his sister to join horse racing. One possible explanation could be his wish to initiate again warrior spirit in the Sparta society which used to grant land to the Olympic Game winners. The other possible reason was Agiselaus II's wish to display Cinisca's abilities to promote women in sport.

Whatever reason was for her participation, as a sign of her victory, Cinisca was given a bronze chariot statue, as well as her statue which was placed in the temple of Zeus in Olympia together with inscription saying that she was the only woman who had won the wreath in the chariot races at the Olympic Games. Besides a sanctuary devoted to Cinisca was built in Sparta, at the place where religious rituals were held. Before that time only Spartan kings could have such an honor.

Cinisca's victory at the Olympic Games had a great impact on the Greek world, as well as the victories of other women that won the horse races later. Their names were Euruleonisa, Belistiche, Timareta, Theodota and Cassia. But neither of them did not gain respect for their success as Cinisca had gained. Zoe Corelli a contemporary Greek female poet, wrote a poem about love Cinisca had for horse racing and her success in the Olympic Games, making her a symbol of women's ascent in the society.

The Modern Olympic Games

The modern Olympic Games have included female competitors since 1900, though at the beginning women took part in by far less demanding events. Concern for physical strength and stamina of women discouraged them to participate in some physically more demanding sports, or in some cases brought about easier female version of male sports.

Some historians and sport analysts attach the female appearance in sport to the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The analysts claim that the first sports in which women took part in were horse riding, ball games, different shaping exercises, tennis, which took place at homes of the rich. Female sport took off by the beginning of the 20th century, when the first official female competition started. Female engagement in sport and physical exercises was actually dosed and the role of woman was viewed through motherhood and raising children. The lack of public interest for female sport enabled amateur competitions become primarily female events. In the middle of the 20th century communist countries had dominant position in many Olympic events including those in which women participated, due to sport programmes, which were technically considered amateur, sponsored by the state. This heritage has been cherished in ex communist countries which have continued to produce a great number of top athletes. Germany and Scandinavian countries have also developed valuable sport program for women.

Professional Female Sport Teams

In the USA almost all the schools required the participation of their students in sport, thus enabling girls to take up athletics at early age. Such programs did not exist in Western Europe and South America. At the events within schools, sexes were often mixed, while they were separated for competitions among different schools. According to one of the laws it is obligatory for colleges and

universities to provide equal possibilities for male and female sport. As a consequence of that a large number of female athletes enabled the USA to be highly positioned nation in female Olympic sports. Tennis has been the most popular female professional sport since 1970. It was also good opportunity for symbolic struggle between sexes, between Billy Jean King and Bobby Rigs. However the success of female tennis have not supported a lot professional female teams.

Starting with the late 60-ies of the 20th century, several women have received recognition for their sport talent and they have been accepted by the society as role models who earn their living through professional sport. Most of them have been living in the USA.

The things started to change in 1973 when Billy Jean King earned more money than her male colleagues. Even now, in the 21st century, majority of professional female athletes throughout the world receive by far less money than men. In 1990 the magazine Life recognized the significance of Billy Jean King's achievement and put her on the list of 100 most important Americans of the 20th century.

The popularity of female professional team sports took off about 1990 when basketball and football were especially interesting. This popularity was asymmetric, being very strong in the USA, some western European countries as well as ex-communist countries. Female football teams were first dominant in the USA, China and Norway, whose male national teams were weak over the last century. However, several countries with successful and dominant male national teams, such as Germany, Sweden, Brazil, have recently become prominent in female football competitions. Still, despite the increase of popularity in professional sport, female leagues continue to face financial problems.

Conclusion

From the historical point of view, it is beyond doubt that female athletes have always been regarded in a wrong and sexist way. Social issues as well as the lack of understanding regarding physical and health limitations in women have caused slow development of female participation in sport over the years (the female marathon race had not been included in the Olympic games before 1984). This discrepancy in the number between male and female participants will surely be reduced in the decades ahead.

Today, approximately a half of world population is engaged in sport through cheering and following different events. This number includes people of both sexes, different ages, cultural background, political or religious beliefs. Sport has become an inseparable part of people's lives in the contemporary society.

Female sport includes amateur and professional women's competitions in all sport. Participation of women in sport dramatically increased during the 20th century, especially during its last quarter, reflecting the changes of the modern society, emphasizing the equality between sexes. Though the level of participation and success varies depending on the country or type of sport, female sport has been widely accepted. In some sports, such as tennis and figure skating, female competitors are more popular than their male colleagues.

Today, women take part, as amateurs or professionals, in almost all significant sports, but they are fewer in contact sports. Understanding of essential physiological differences between sexes has not created an obstacle for development of top female athletes in some traditionally male sports, such as golf, ice hockey or marathon.

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