

WOMEN ALWAYS IN THE RACE



The history of women is doubtless one of the hardest to write, in sport as in other areas. It will certainly be acknowledged that plenty of obscure points remain in the history of men's competitions over the centuries. What, then, are we to say of those open to women? The research work is arduous and difficult if not impossible, so tenacious are prevailing prejudices. Noel Tamini has followed the trail of the female pioneers of the foot race.

By Noel Tamini

People are still reluctant to admit what, less than a century ago, the lives of women in Europe were like. As for practising sport...At that time, in France, Yves-Pierre Boulongne (1) tells us, "the sports movement counted only a few aristocratic eccentrics such as the Duchess of Abrantés. Farming and working women, bowed down with work, worn out by motherhood, obviously had other concerns". At the threshold of the "belle époque", even the lot of a young society girl was not an enviable one. What did sport represent for those women? "A pleasant distraction, a healthy and idle pastime", observes Boulongne (2). And even then, at the expense of a travesty: a woman's body had to remain concealed from view, hidden, encased (...).

And yet, at that time, we find two young women taking to the marathon! One can imagine the kind of get-up they had to contend with (3).

What is more, this double event took place in Greece, not far from the harems of Constantinople! In Paris or Berlin, OK. In Berlin, for example, in 1896, a woman created "Die Radlerin" (the lady cyclist), a journal exclusively devoted to women's cycling. In Paris, although foot-racing was already the Cinderella of sports, cycling was all the rage, a little queen, keenly courted. "A nail which perforates an air chamber is a fairly banal thing". So began an article offered by a major weekly to its keen young readers (4). There followed a little story which, today, would be dismissed as women's tittle tattle. Be that as it may, at the time, this nonsense occupied as much space as the results of five athletics competitions. And, let us make no mistake about it, the gentle readers of this weekly paper never learned that, in spring 1896, two women claimed the right to follow in the footsteps of Pheidippides, the mythical messenger of Marathon.

And yet, and yet...On 15th February 1885, there appeared in *Le Figaro* these lines which still astonish: "foot races have so far become part of our way of life that they are starting to make converts even among women, keen as they are on all things sporting. There were rumours this morning at the Racing Club that a rival association made up of fashionable women was in the process of

being organized under the patronage of Countess Potocka. Atalanta against Hippomenes, hurrah for the pretty runners!" It was but wishful thinking. It was not until almost a century later that young girls and young women were able to run to their hearts' content.

ATALANTA, THE FIRST WOMAN CONTESTANT

Be all that as it might, the two determined, then frustrated young Greek women were not the first women to run in competition. The very first could well have been Atalanta, a proper little tomboy who gave herself only to Hippomenes, who beat her in a race. We know too that young girls competed at Olympia, at least in the festival of Hera - the Roman Juno in September, after the Games for the men. Much later, the emperor Domitian was to authorize public races for "unmarried young women(5)". Finally, under the reign of one of the Theodorics, women are said to have taken part in races within the circus at Rome.

FAIRGROUND RACES

Centuries later, when women's racing was born again, it was initially and for a long time as a base form of entertainment. In the middle ages, women's races were held in certain towns at carnival time or during well-known fairs. But respectable women were barely to be seen there.

The first women's race of this millennium probably came into being in France on the occasion of the Baucaire fair, attested from 1168. "The lawyers of Baucaire in Languedoc", an 18th century lawyer tells us, "had instituted a race in which the local prostitutes and those who wished to come to the Magdeleine fair (22nd July) ran in public the day before the fair. And the one who ran the best and reached the appointed finish first received as a prize a packet of aglets(6)".

"The only thing the Italians certainly inherited from the Romans", says the highly erudite Rodocanachi(7), "is their taste for races". From Dante's time onwards, they have been their favourite entertainment. Speaking

of a soul in hell who leaves in haste, he compares him to "those who ran in Verona for the green flag across the fields".

At that time, the races in Verona were famous throughout Italy. "They had the variety of the ancient races", Rodocanachi recalls, "as the competitions involved not only horses but also men, donkeys and women. From the 13th century onwards, other races were held in Italy. The statutes of nearly all the cities of that country in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries include rules concerning races. Again according to Rodocanachi, "the most brilliant races at that time were those held in Ferrara...the fastest woman received a piece of red cloth; the one who came second, enough cotton cloth to make a skirt; the third to finish, the same quantity of linen cloth; the fourth, a pair of shoes; and all the others a thirty-six quatrini silver teston(8)".

Atalanta was well known in the 4th Century before the common era.'



Elsewhere too, women ran at certain festivals. In Germany, one of the best known races took place at Marktgroningen in Württemberg. There was at least one other festival in Germany at which young girls ran carrying on their heads a pitcher of water “which they were not allowed to support with their hands(V)”. Pitcher races also existed among the Basques and in Corsica.

MELPOMENE’S PREMATURE MARATHON

The tradition of these women’s races had been virtually lost when, in February 1896, a Greek woman asked to participate in the first Olympic marathon. Only her forename is recorded, Melpomene, the name of the muse of tragedy. This Greek woman was before her time, that was her only wrong. Furthermore, though they may not admit it, men are not very keen on female pioneers. Rather than making martyrs of them, they prefer to consign them to the sidelines of history. So it is that for decades, a woman’s run from Marathon to Athens stayed in the curio drawer. Although we know virtually nothing about this crazy pioneer, Melpomene really did exist.

Melpomene did not benefit from modern equipment.



The supplement of the Athens Messenger seems to have been the first source to mention the intention of a woman to take part in the marathon, according to the issue of “Sport im Bild”, a German magazine, of 27th March 1896. “A woman”, it tells us, “carried out an experiment a few days ago. She ran the 42 kilometres in four and a half hours. Half-way, she stopped for ten minutes to eat a few oranges.” “As five or six weeks probably went by”, Lennartz writes(10), “between the text in the Olympic supplement and the the reference to it in “Sport im Bild”, we can situate the sports event described in late February.” For over thirty years, it was not mentioned again. Somewhat faded and no less bizarre, the item was revived in 1927 in an issue of “Der Leichtathlet”. As if fearing mockery, the author of the text signed timidly: “report of a former athlete”. The news fell upon deaf ears.

THE SORRY 800M IN AMSTERDAM

A year later, at the Games in 1928, women were allowed for the first time to run in a stadium over the exceptional distance of...800m. An extraordinary distance, especially for the august and male writers of the rules. What a fiasco. They judged the outcome of the race disastrous. “The girls were ill prepared”, explained Gaston Meyer, “and had no idea of the pace to adopt! After a frantic initial sprint, they collapsed on the grass, arms crossed...” That was all it took for the haughty regulators to banish from their Games the redoubtable 800m race. A distance thenceforth forbidden for women, the double stadia was to resurface in Rome in 1960, where it was run by emaciated and ungainly-looking athletes. Eric Walter, a Swiss chronicler, even saw them as “mustachioed”! The story of Melpomene was to surface in 1964, thanks to the zeal of Eva Földes, a Hungarian specialist in sports history. The story of this Eve of the marathon was thus made known just three years before the world witnessed the infamous audacity of Miss Switzer, a shameless young American who dared to run the Boston marathon without any chaperon! By that time, it was known that Melpomene had trained for just three little weeks and that in February 1896, cyclists had accompanied her during her attempt.



In Amsterdam in 1928, women run the 800m for the first time.

Previously, the Olympic Committee had apparently refused to enter her for the first marathon. Indeed, until his death, Baron de Coubertin, who was against women's participation in his Games, was to cling resolutely to a misogyny which had its roots in his upbringing but also in the time of his youth. One in which, in 1879, when he was sixteen years old, Doctor Broca, a leading light in French anthropology, was able to write with impunity that women's "inferiority of intelligence is too obvious to be contested(11)".

Referring to the story of Melpomene, in early spring 1896, the paper Akropolis wrote: "The Olympic committee deserves censure, as it was discourteous to refuse to enter a lady". And because it is never as obvious as it seems, the Greek paper adds: "We can assure those interested that none of the participants would have raised the least objection". Except that "those interested" did not give a

damn about the runners' opinion. Two days after the first Olympic marathon, the Athenian newspaper Asty reported a fact that still surprises the philistines and confounds historians today. It states that, the previous day, i.e. on 11 th April 1896, a woman from the island of Syros had also run the distance from Marathon to Athens. She was thirty-five years old, mother of seven children, and her name was Stamathia Rovithi. Another female pioneer had done it. At the village of Marathon, she asked people to write her starting time (08.00 hours) on a piece of paper. Once she arrived in Athens, she asked two policemen to confirm her time of arrival (13.30 hours).

So another woman had repeated the ancient messenger's feat. Stamathia did not hide the fact that she had had the idea the day before, after the fantastic victory of the Greek, Spiridon Louys. She had hoped to attract the King's attention and obtain an apprenticeship for one of her children.

WOMEN

When this woman was introduced to him, Philemon Timoleon, Secretary-General of the Games, was more than sceptical. Was this matron capable of repeating the feat of Pheidippides and Spiridon? Surely not. It is said that the young woman merely lowered her eyes, indicating her shoes. Then, Timoleon understood that two feet are enough to describe without words the pain of a marathon.

N. T.

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Women did not have another 800m until 1960. Here Ann Packer heading the field in Tokyo in 1964.



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2. Y.P. Boulongne (1991), op. cit.
3. It was in 1912 at the Games in Stockholm that the first female athlete appeared in shorts. The Greek women in the Games of Hera ran in a chiton, a sort of enticing minidress.
4. *Journal de la Jeunesse*, no 1247, autumn 1897
5. According to D. Martucci, *Olympic Review*, Lausanne, September 1991
6. D.D.A. (F.F. Dreux du Radier, 1914-1780). *Récréations historiques, critiques, morales et d'érudition; avec l'Histoire des Fous en titre d'office* (historical, critical, moral and scholarly recreations). The Hague, 1768.
7. E. Rodocanachi, *Etudes et fantaisies historiques* (historical studies and fantasies), Paris, 1919
8. Ibid. The teston, so called because it had an effigy of the head of Louis XII on one side, was worth about three francs...at their 1919 value.
9. G. Depping. *Merveilles de la force et de l'adresse* (wonders of strength and skill), Paris 1871
10. K. Lennartz, *Condition*, No 5/1986
11. S. Jay Gould, *La mal mesure de l'homme* (man's mismeasure), Ramsay, 1983

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