

of this time provide insight into the activities of the female nobility. The Scots loved golf and Mary, Queen of Scots, is reported to have enjoyed golf. Elizabeth I and her court enjoyed bear baiting and hunting. She was known to have been an excellent horsewoman and skilled with a cross-bow. It is likely that other upper-class women participated in tennis, archery, fencing, bowling, and hunting that were popular during this era. Outside of Renaissance Europe, paintings depict women participating in a variety of activities during the 16th century. Women of the upper class, who enjoyed considerable leisure and privilege, were able to engage in popular activities of the day in various cultures. Paintings depict Nordic women stag hunting on skis, Japanese women fishing, and Indian women playing polo.<sup>29</sup>



*A queen and her female slaves playing polo. Mughal Mss. Dárábnáma, c. 1580. By permission of the British Library, (Or 4615) London. Reprinted from Sally Fox, The Sporting Woman.*

## Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

During this era, the earliest attempts to institutionalize sport in Europe began, however, most physically recreative activities continued to be largely informal and associated with holidays, festivals, and other celebrations.<sup>30</sup> And while the participation of women in these activities continued to be less than that of men, much evidence suggests that they continued,

as they had in previous centuries, to engage in a vast array of activities. They were spectators at horseraces, prize fights and cricket matches in England. They played bowls, billiards, shuffleboard and battledore, and occasionally played cricket. A few women were prize fighters, wrestlers, and pedestrians.<sup>31</sup> Prints and paintings from several countries in Europe depict women skating, ice sledding, sleighing, dancing, riding, hunting, and playing a variety of parlour games. Paintings of upper-class women in France and Germany depict women in hot air balloons. Royal ladies in India are shown hunting wild game. And, in Japan, women of the upper class are shown playing football.<sup>32</sup>



*Girls Kicking a Football. Edo Period. By Tsuneyuki (1676-174 1). Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.*

Native American women danced and played ball games, and early American women engaged in physical activities as leisure permitted. They danced, played cards and board games, and were spectators at boxing matches and horseraces. Others played cricket, paddled their own canoes, and participated in horseraces. Paintings and etchings show that upper class women in the Colonies enjoyed pastimes similar to their European counterparts.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

The physically recreative pastimes of women have varied considerably from the earliest cultures to the beginning of the 19th century, as they have also varied from one culture to the next. Participation was often determined by social class and the availability of leisure. In the hierarchical structure of these societies, women were often excluded from male activities, yet they nonetheless found expression and pleasure most often in dance, music, swimming, board games, and cultural rituals. A limited few, like the bull-leapers of ancient Crete, the Spartan women, and the ladies of the nobility were able to enjoy more vigorous physical activities.

The 19th century gave birth to modern sport, and, as the Modern Olympics made evident, women were excluded from male sporting practices. Many decades passed before women could enter the modern sporting world. The physically recreative pastimes of the previous centuries, however, are a part of the sporting traditions of women throughout the world.

\*Ph. D., Visiting Professor, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Semmelweis University, Budapest (Hungary).

<sup>1</sup> Contemporary sport is typically defined as an institutionalized, highly-structured, rule-bound physical contest. According to Roberta J. Park ("From 'Genteel Diversions' to 'Bruising Peg': Active Pastimes, Exercise, and Sports for Females in Late 17th- and 18th - Century Europe," in Costa, D. Margaret and Guthrie, Sharon R. *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Champaign, ILL: Human Kinetics, 1994, 28), the term sport, as it was initially used, designated a variety of activities that gave enjoyment or recreation.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that a public bath or swimming pool existed at Mohenjo-daro, one of two early settlements, with evidence to suggest that this pool was for public use (K. Rajagopalan, "Early Indian Physical Education," in Earle F Zeigler, *A History of Sport and Physical Education to 1900* (Champaign, ILL: Stipes Publishing Company, 1973) 45-55.

<sup>3</sup> Uriel Simri, "The Ball Games of Antiquity," in Zeigler, 1973, 93-99.

<sup>4</sup> Maxwell L. Howell and Reet Howell. "Physical Activities and Sport in Early Societies," in Zeigler, Earle F. *History of Physical Education and Sport* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), 1-56.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Denise Palmer and Maxwell L. Howell, "Sports and Games in Early Civilizations," in Zeigler, 1973, 21-34.

<sup>8</sup> Rajagopalan, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Deobold B. Van Dalen and Bruce L. Bennett, *A World History of Physical Education* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971) 14.

<sup>10</sup> International Olympic Committee, *5000 Years of Sport in China: Art and Tradition* (Lausanne: Musée Olympique, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Kohsuke Sasajima, "Early Chinese Physical Education and Sport," in Zeigler, 1973, 35-44.

<sup>12</sup> Rajagopalan, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Van Dalen and Bennett, 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> Among the more notable of these were Hera, Demeter, Artemis, and

Athena. According to Drees, L. *Olympia* (New York: Prager, 1968), there is an altar to Demeter at Olympia, but the connection between the goddess and the Olympic Games is not known. Artemis, sister of Apollo, was the goddess of all wild animals and associated with hunting. As the goddess of war and the protector of cities such as Athens, Sparta, Troy, and Argos, Athena was often celebrated at festivals and races.

<sup>15</sup> Clarence A. Forbes, "The Spartan Agoge," in Zeigler, 1973, 134.

<sup>16</sup> Not only were they excluded from participating in sporting activities; they were not allowed to attend the ancient Olympic Games or other sporting festivals. A legend informs us of their exclusion. Kallipateira, a mother of a young wrestler who wanted to see her son's contest, dressed as a trainer and was allowed entry into Olympia. It was discovered that she was a female when she jumped up in celebration of her son's victory. The punishment for women who came to the Games was death; however, Kallipateira was allowed to live because there had been many Olympic champions in her family.

<sup>17</sup> Translated by Tom Dodge in *A Literature of Sports* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> According to Joachim Ebert, *Griechischen und Hippischen Agonen* (Berlin: Academic Verlag, 1972, 110-111), it was Cyniska who commissioned, and perhaps wrote, what Appeleas, an artist inscribed on the monument. Ebert writes that, according to Pausanias, Cyniska and her brother, Agesilaos, wanted to show the citizens of Sparta that women could own, breed, and train horses. The equestrian events displayed as well the wealth of families (Pausanias, Book III, 8, I).

<sup>19</sup> Nicolaos Yalouris. *The Olympic Games in Ancient Greece* (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon S.A., 1976) 78.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

<sup>21</sup> Reet A. Howell and Maxwell L. Howell, "Women in Leisure Activities in Ancient Greece and Rome," *Medicine and Sport Science*, vol. 24, 83-100. It is important to note that the mosaic is located in a villa for the wealthy, and it is likely that only women of the upper class engaged in such exercises.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Robert J. Higgs and Neil D. Isaacs. *The Sporting Spirit: Athletes in Literature and Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, inc., 1977) 140.

<sup>24</sup> June Kennard and John Marshall Carter, "In the Beginning: The Ancient and Medieval Worlds," in Costa and Guthrie, 15-26.

<sup>25</sup> Lady Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Arthur Waley (Cambridge: Riverside Press, n.d.).

<sup>26</sup> Kennard and Carter, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Van Dalen and Bennett, 113-115.

<sup>28</sup> Kennard and Carter, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Refer to Sally Fox, *The Sporting Woman A Book of Days* (London: Bulfinch Press, 1989) for reproductions of these paintings.

<sup>30</sup> Park, 30.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 30-35.

<sup>32</sup> Refer to Fox.

<sup>33</sup> For a more complete discussion of the pastimes of women in 17th and 18th century America, refer to Nancy L. Struna, "The Recreational Experiences of Early American Women", in Costa and Guthrie, pp. 45-62 and Nancy L. Struna, *People of Prowess: Sport, Leisure, and Labor in Early Anglo-America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).



## PIERRE DE COUBERTIN AND WOMEN'S SPORT

**T**he issue of Pierre de Coubertin's relationship with women's sport is a recurrent one which poisons Olympic debate. From the fields of physiology, anthropology and pedagogy where Coubertin situated it, the problem has moved wholly into the areas of politics and the media. The causes of this shift are clear. Ignorance of Coubertin's work, the activism of feminist leagues and radical political groups and the slow growth at university level of Olympic historiography have encouraged the spread of a vulgate where mistakes and abbreviated quotations taken out of their historical and cultural context have fuelled all kinds of arguments.

What was possible yesterday, and sometimes excusable when access to sources was closed, is so no longer. The IOC's archives are now scientifically organized and open to all. The "Textes choisis" (selected texts) of Coubertin's work, published by the IOC in 1986 under the responsibility of Professor Norbert Müller, have made an irreplaceable contribution. The IOC, increasingly focused on historical truth and democratic openness, has created an Olympic Research Council which has links with the best universities in the world.

Coubertin's work is today accessible without restriction from the Olympic institution, with no hidden or protected areas.

What is all this about? About studying Coubertin's position towards women's sport, a study which is seemingly pointless, such does the question appear definitively settled. We are faced with tautology. Through a cunning confusion

by Yves-Pierre Boulongne\*



of ideas, basing themselves on Coubertin's opposition to women's participation in the Olympic programme - and not, we shall see, in the celebration of the Olympic Games - those who denigrate his work deduce irrevocably from this that Coubertin was opposed to women's sport, or even an unrepentant misogynist. The truth is far more complex and less abrupt, even if Coubertin's peremptory declarations appear, at first sight, to be final.

### A basis of certainty

Let us take an diachronic look at the sources.

1912 Stockholm Games. Women had entered the Games through the back door, and not without breaking some locks, in Paris (1900), St Louis, Missouri (1904) and London (1908).

The official report of the Games in Stockholm, written in French and undoubtedly with Coubertin's backing, states: "*An Olympiad with females would be impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and improper*". This is certainly Coubertin's style and vocabulary; the choice of terms is not innocent, even if the word "female" must be taken in a more strictly physiological and less pejorative sense than today.

Moreover, curiously, on page 111 of the July 1912 edition of the Olympic

Review, the text, unquestionably signed by Coubertin, is toned down in terms of form, but just as firm in terms of content.

"Impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and, we are not afraid to say it, improper: such would be, in our view, this women's pseudo-Olympiad".

This was the time when women's movements were violently demanding the creation of Olympic Games for women. The good manners of the gentleman have regained the upper hand, but the opposition is just as implacable.

### Let us go back in time!

**IOC Bulletin- 3rd year - 1928 (n°11 page 5).**

*"As to the admission of women to the Games, I remain strongly against it. It was against my will that they were admitted to a growing number of competitions."*

### Sport Suisse - 4 July 1934

Speech given on 23 June 1934 in the main hall of Lausanne University on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the re-establishment of the Games of the V Olympiad: "*I still think that contact with women's athletics is bad for [the male athlete], and that these athletics should be excluded from the Olympic programme.*"

### Le Journal - Paris, 27 August 1936,

almost a year before Coubertin's death.

*"The only real Olympic hero, as I said, is the individual adult male. Therefore, no women or team sports."*

The case has definitively been heard. Throughout his life, Coubertin would remain an unconditional opponent of women's participation in the programme of the Olympic Games.





### But

In a special brochure published after the Games in Antwerp in 1920, he wrote: *“Women (were) admitted to the Games. They excelled there, beating their previous records.”*

The tone is conciliatory and gives the impression of some softening of his initial strictness. This is because, since the First World War where, in the factories and fields, they had courageously and efficiently replaced the men who had gone to the front, women were increasingly calling for a place in the social order. Coubertin could no longer be insensitive to the rightness of their struggle. The form of the speech here reveals much about the fight he was waging and the struggle in which he was painfully engaged against his own prejudices.

Reading the interview he gave to *“Le Sport Suisse”* of 7 August 1935, is highly instructive in this regard. Coubertin, referring to history but doubtless driven into a corner by the

unceasing feminist crusade, ends up conceding that it would be possible to envisage participation by women in the Games, but outside the sacred enclosure (the ancient Altis) reserved solely for men’s competitions. The same should be done, he adds, for team sports, as the Olympic Games must be the strict preserve of the young adult male.

The text of 7 August 1935 read:

*“The true Olympic hero is, in my view, the adult male individual. Must team sports therefore be excluded? This does not necessarily follow, if one recognizes another essential feature of modern Olympism, as was the case in Ancient Olympia: the existence of an Altis or sacred enclosure. There were many events at Olympia which took place outside the Altis; an entire communal life seethed around it, which nonetheless never had the privilege of entering inside. The Altis itself was a sanctuary reserved only to the athlete, who was consecrated, purified and*

*admitted to the principal contests, and who had thereby become a sort of officiating priest of the muscular religion. In the same way, I imagine modern Olympism as consisting at its centre of a sort of moral Altis, a Sacred Keep wherein the confrontation of strengths unites the competitors in the manly sports par excellence [...] and then round about them all the other manifestations of sporting life which it may be desired to organize. football competitions and other games, team exercises, etc. They will thus be fittingly honoured, but in the second rank.*

*Women could also take part here if it is judged necessary. I personally do not approve of the participation of women in public competitions, which is not to say that they must abstain from practising a great number of sports, provided that they do not make a public spectacle of themselves. In the Olympic Games, as in the contests of former times, their primary role should be to crown the victors.”*

Coubertin’s position thus remains unchanged, even if, pushed by the evolution of mores, he reluctantly allows women to play a very minor role at the Games. The text, which, moreover is worthy of comment for its historicism (muscular religion, mediaeval tournaments), has the merit of referring to other texts from the beginning of the century, in which Coubertin sets out in plain terms his philosophical conception of women’s place in the world - from which he deduces women’s place in sport, but also of painting a more nuanced (and little known) picture of Coubertin’s relations with women’s sport.

### Because

**Notes on public education - 1901 - Hachette § XVII and “Textes choisis” - I - page 261**

*“The role of the woman remains what it has always been: she is above all man’s companion, the future mother;*



Pierre de Coubertin.

and must be educated with that unchanging future in mind.”

He adds: “There is nothing more legitimate than that she be protected by laws and be able to escape from marital tyranny; there is nothing more necessary that that inept or immoral provisions be hunted down, like those whereby the French Civil Code decrees the perpetual guardianship of women, or forbids action to establish paternity” So it is quite clear “man’s companion”, protected on an individual level, must remain under guardianship on a social level, to ensure the survival of the species (at the time the word “race” was used, with no other connotations).

## Le Sport Suisse - 1928 - 21 and 28 November - n° 1074 and 1975.

Coubertin stands firm, and situates the issue of women’s sport in the cultural and moral context of the time. If, in spite of his efforts, sports competitions are opened to women, in no case should these competitions be mixed or take place in public.

### Why?

“Today, in a large number of countries, it is the girl who corrupts the boy, but parents encourage boys to be flirtatious at an early age”.

So woman is man’s devil, the obvious influence of a rigid Catholic conception handed on at the time by a behind-the-bedroom-door culture carrying all the sins of lust and venereal disease. Here we find one of the parameters of Coubertin’s crusade “(for) the education of adolescents in the 20th century”, the moralization of the century through the puritanization of the young ephebe’s morals.

Here is an essential (more than existential) position assimilated by centuries of Judaeo-Christian culture: woman is the servant of man, the procreator of the species, the guardian and ‘arbiter of morals’ (Michelet, quoted by Coubertin). This means that men,



The parade of the Danish demonstration gymnastics team at the Games in Stockholm in 1912.

within a given area (yesterday in Greece: oecumene, today: the home), and from which it is bad for social morality for women to move away, acknowledge women to have duties rather than rights. This is the law of the patio. And it is the dominant image of the mother that Coubertin would receive from his education as a child. Such is the image of women that contemporary French science, a reflection of the age, would give him.

Let us now make a brief synchronic foray into the field of social culture.

- Dr Brocca (1824-1880), founder of the Parisian Anthropological Society, writes: “We must not lose sight of the fact that the average woman is rather less intelligent than the man.”

- Gustave Le Bon, a recognized researcher into social psychology: “(Among women) inferior intelligence is too obvious to be disputed [...] In terms of volume, women’s brains are closer to those of gorillas than the more developed male crania” (1879).

Although, notes Coubertin: “heroism among women is anything but an illusion”, and is perhaps “as frequent as, and more admirable than male hero-

ism”, the roughness of male effort [...], which is at the root of sports education (male, he means) is something “greatly to be feared for the woman”, who would find “demands placed on her nerves beyond her role . . . and the most precious feminine qualities neutralized.” In 1904 (op. cit.), Coubertin explains: “Equality does not mean equivalence but similarity.. Equivalence is already a reality.. Similarity far from encouraging conjugal harmony; is certain to destroy it.”

It was in the name of this principle of equivalence, and not equality, that Coubertin would act vis-à-vis the genesis and development of women’s sport. His thinking was drawn from his vast Greco-Roman culture, but also from the contemporary view of women offered by his aristocratic Parisian social circle. Now, by the start of the century, this bourgeois woman, while remaining within the prudent limits of an oecumene of propriety, had nonetheless acquired a number of rights: education, and the practice of certain sports such as horse-riding, fencing, hunting and sea-bathing, which offered a foretaste of other freedoms He had the example of his own

family, where his mother and sister had received a good secondary and higher education, and practised fencing. What was different, but which Coubertin had difficulty in seeing and accepting, was the new relationship between women and their bodies, a new, timid but pressing vision of femininity and female sexuality demanded by women in the name of the very principles of democracy and freedom which Coubertin accepted on a political level, but objected to on an anthropological level. Here, as with colonialism, Coubertin's ambiguous position reflects the contradictions of a social visionary alienated by outdated cultural principles.

## Hence

### Concession of sports education

Even though forced to concede this, Coubertin nonetheless devoted his full attention to sports training for women - which his detractors do not point out.

### Le Sport Suisse - 21 and 28 November 1928 (n°s 1074 and 1975)

*"Physical training and sports training, yes; this is excellent for girls and women"*, but not mixed competitions.

### Charter for Sports Reform - BIPS - Lausanne - 1930

*"No admission of women to any competition in which men are taking part"*. Equivalence, but not equality! However, his choice of sports, his passionate love of boxing and rowing, would take Coubertin much further.

### Olympic Review - September 1913 - pp. 142-145. Textes choisis III - pp. 444-446

*"So here our adolescents, girls and boys, have been introduced (not too much, of course) to the world of sports by top-quality, wholly reliable godparents: rowing and boxing. It goes without saying that they have not raced or fought bouts. They have rowed under the tutorship of an intelligent coach, and boxed under the orders of a prudent master..."*

*Gradually, it will be appropriate to include running, but cautiously and case by case. And then, but only then, will come the athletic game, the man's game par excellence, rugby football. Here, the girls will have to miss out in the same way, the rowing and boxing to which we have admitted them will have to be taught in a much gentler way (especially boxing) than to the boys. But they will beneficially be introduced to these sports. Football, on the other hand, is not an option for them. Is there not a game which could take its place for them? Indeed there is. It is korfbal, as practised in Holland, a mixed game which we should like to see develop everywhere, but which unfortunately, since its invention, has not acquired many followers. But its turn will come."*

The text dates from 1913. Did we read that correctly? Rowing, all right; but boxing, yes boxing, taught to girls? And in addition a team sport. Can you get more modern than that? Yes, of course, in the sense that women would be given the freedom to decide for themselves the components of their sports training, and the institutional details of their sports encounters, without any restrictions of a social or cultural nature.

For in fact, Coubertin is allowing women the right to a sporting education, and even sports competition between one another, but away from a by definition concupiscent male audience! Coubertin's restrictions on women's sports competition are thus less of a physiological nature (although these do exist) than an anthropological or cultural nature - since women's boxing is possible.

What Coubertin was unable to do was suppress his "old man's" reflexes and understand that, even through the excesses of the feminists and suffragettes, a new relationship between the sexes was being established, and would last throughout the subsequent century.

## And so?

There is great malice on the part of those people generally inclined to judge Coubertin's attitude towards women's sport and participation by women in the programme of the modern Olympic Games through 21st century eyes. In history, the sin of anachronism is unpardonable.

Yes, Pierre de Coubertin, marked by the dogmas and proprieties of his sex, education, class and time, conceded only an atrophied form of sporting culture to women deprived of the freedom to compete in public. For all that, even if a piece of the puzzle is missing from the overall picture, we would be wrong to subject the whole to public obloquy. Friends of Olympism need not be embarrassed to shine the harsh light of history on a moment in the construction of modern Olympism. The historian can find, describe and offer ideas for consideration to the policy- and decision-makers of today. The real crime against Olympism would be not to take the facts into account, and close our minds to developments in the world. It is once again Coubertin who teaches us this: *"The Games must espouse the life of the world, and not remain a prisoner of a purely arbitrary set of rules"*. (Le journal - Paris, 27 August 1936.)

Coubertin had a restrictive vision of women's sport. He reluctantly bowed to the ultimately victorious attacks of a female and sporting counter-society. Let us note and act upon this.

Looking to the future, let us today ensure that women's sport freely and fully occupies the place it rightly deserves, not just within the Olympic Movement but within the global society of the 21st century.

\* Honorary professor of the University of Paris - Val de Marne, Créteil (France), Training and Educational Science Research Unit