



## The modern Olympic Movement, women's sport and the social order during the inter-war period

Florence Carpentier & Jean-Pierre Lefèvre

To cite this article: Florence Carpentier & Jean-Pierre Lefèvre (2006) The modern Olympic Movement, women's sport and the social order during the inter-war period, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 23:7, 1112-1127, DOI: [10.1080/09523360600832387](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523360600832387)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523360600832387>



Published online: 04 Oct 2006.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1548



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 12 View citing articles [↗](#)

# The Modern Olympic Movement, Women's Sport and the Social Order During the Inter-war Period

Florence Carpentier and Jean-Pierre Lefèvre

*The Olympic Movement, created by the French Baron Pierre de Coubertin, was conceived as a tool to promote and spread European aristocratic and masculine values. That is why women were not included in the first Olympic programme in 1896. Nevertheless, the growing influence of feminist movements before and after the First World War sparked the development of international women's sports contests. Since 1921, the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale, directed by Alice Milliat, organized regular 'Women's Games' and was affiliated with the same number of countries as similar male international federations. This expanded role of women and women's sport challenged the established social order of masculine domination. Despite the fact that women's participation in the Games can be seen as early as 1900, the Olympic Games at which the participation of female athletes became more notable to some historians was not until those held in 1928 in Amsterdam. But the overture made to women did not emerge from the willingness of the International Olympic Committee. Rather, it must be attributed to Sigfried Edström, President of the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF). The motives of Edström were far from benevolent; he wanted to control women's sport in order to maintain the social order dominated by men.*

Since the inter-war period, women have been demanding the right to fully participate in the Olympic Games, the most prestigious of all international sports competitions. Yet the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has only recently adopted a policy of true equality for men and women. [1] In the Athens Games of 2004, women's overall participation surpassed 40 per cent for the first time and the number of women's events had risen appreciably. [2] Today, at the Olympic Games, only baseball (dropped recently from the 2012 programme) and boxing remain exclusively

---

Florence Carpentier and Jean-Pierre Lefèvre, Centre d'Etudes des Transformations des Activités Physiques et Sportives (EA 3832), French University of Rouen. Correspondence to: [florence.carpentier@rouen.iufm.fr](mailto:florence.carpentier@rouen.iufm.fr)

masculine sports. Despite progress in the status and representation of women in our societies, it is interesting to note that the IOC has never capitulated to outside pressures; it opened the Games to women essentially as the result of internal factors. [3] The constitution and internal functioning of the committee has remained virtually unchanged since 1925, the date when its founder, Pierre de Coubertin, resigned. It confers on its members absolute control over the future of the committee itself and that of the Olympic Games. This article explores how the IOC under Henri de Baillet-Latour, [4] the founder's successor, protected itself from and reacted to women's first demands for access to the Games. [5]

At the same time that the International Olympic Committee and the modern Olympic Games were founded in 1894 the first IOC members were also recruited by Coubertin from amongst a small group of mainly aristocratic men. In a European society that has traditionally separated the rich from the poor and men from women, it was normal and convenient that these first IOC members would all come from the same social class and be of the same sex. One might even say that the Olympic Movement was conceived as a tool to promote and spread European aristocratic values and masculine values. [6] Pierre de Coubertin did not express himself very often on the subject of women's sport, but the few opinions that he did express were particularly harsh on women athletes. His criticisms were essentially based on the biological differences between the sexes and comprised two main arguments. First, and most important, he argued that women were not physically made for athletic activity, which he considered too violent for them. Women, to his mind, were like other 'weak' members of society – children, the elderly, and the sick – and were best suited for physical education and the pursuit of public and personal health-oriented goals. [7] Moreover, Coubertin believed that women's athletic 'exhibitions' were a distinct threat to the spectators' morals. Noting that athletic clothing was lighter than ordinary dress, he was concerned that the sight of women's nearly nude bodies would arouse the primordial passions of the male spectators. A clear danger was thus that the spectacle of the lightly clothed female body would become more attractive than the athletic performance itself. [8] For these reasons, the Olympic Games created in 1894 were off limits to women athletes. It is thus interesting to note that as of 1900 the sports programmes show that women's events were held (see Table 1). [9]

Sheila Mitchell has explained this remarkable inclusion of women as follows: up to the Stockholm Games of 1912, the actual organization of athletic competition was completely outside the control of the IOC and Coubertin:

Although the IOC purported to have control over the program, in fact, the responsibility of actually formulating the program was in the hands of the organizing committees.... It was under these conditions that women were first admitted to the Games without the official consent or comment from the IOC. [10]

After the First World War, the IOC thus decided to create an organizing committee that would be structured and controlled by its own members, but this move did not bring about the withdrawal of the women's events. To avoid disavowing

**Table 1** Women's participation in the Olympic Games under the Presidency of Pierre de Coubertin (1896–1925)

	Women's participation	Men's participation	Women's sports
Olympic Games of 1900, Paris	22	975	Golf Equestrian sports (mixed) Tennis (mixed) Sailing (mixed)
Olympic Games of 1904, St Louis	6	645	Archery
Olympic Games of 1908, London	37	1,971	Figure skating (mixed) Tennis Archery Sailing (mixed)
Olympic Games of 1912, Stockholm	48	2,359	Swimming Diving Equestrian sports (mixed) Tennis Sailing (mixed)
Olympic Games of 1920, Antwerp	65	2,561	Swimming Figure skating Diving Equestrian sports Tennis Sailing (mixed)
Olympic Games of 1924, Paris	135	2,954	Fencing Swimming Diving Equestrian sports Tennis Sailing (mixed)

*Note:* The number of men and women, as well as the details on the women's sports, can be found on the official IOC site on the specific Games related page for each of these editions of the Olympic celebration. The data differ slightly depending on the bibliographic source.

the preceding organizations, Coubertin's IOC found that it could not just dismiss the women's sports competitions that had already been included. Nevertheless, Coubertin was determined not to allow women open access to the competitive programme. In 1919, just as women's sport was blossoming in France, the future President of the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI), the Frenchwoman Alice Milliat [11], requested that the IOC include women in the track and field programme. As she recounted it, she 'came up against a solid wall of refusal, which led directly to the creation of the Women's Olympic Games'. [12] Thus, in the Olympic Games of 1920 and 1924 that were organized during the presidency of Coubertin, women, despite a few participants, were not yet largely integrated into the Olympic sports programme. [13] For some historians of the modern Olympic Movement, the first notable instance of women's participation is that of the Games of the Olympiad which were held in Amsterdam in 1928. They were the first Summer

Games to be organized during the term of the new IOC President, Henri de Baillet-Latour. Nonetheless, Coubertin's resignation and the introduction of a new IOC President did not automatically translate into an increased inclusion of women in the Olympic Games. [14] Coubertin's successors held the same values as he, and the relative participation of women in the Amsterdam Games must, in fact, be attributed to the intervention of the International Amateur Athletic Federation and its Swedish President, Sigfried Edström. [15] Athletics dominated women's sport between the two wars, and thus it is not surprising that the IAAF would play a role in this history. The IAAF President had been an influential member of the IOC Executive Board since its creation in 1921 and had been acting as an intermediary between the Olympic governing body, the IAAF and the FSFI since 1926. We will see that the overtures made to women in 1928 were, more than anything, a means for male institutions to better control women in a changing social context that seemed favourable to granting them more freedom.

In the period between the two world wars, a women's movement towards greater liberty was just beginning to gather steam, continuing a phenomenon that had begun prior to the First World War with the appearance of many national feminist movements. [16] Against this background, a women's sports movement was also emerging, not only in the United States and Europe but also in Asia, to the point that a federation was formed in 1921 to organize regular 'Women's Games'. Given that the reigning social model imposed a separation of the sexes in most spheres of life (in the workplace, at school and in leisure activities), it should not be surprising that an explicitly 'feminine' sports movement would eventually develop in parallel to the implicitly 'masculine' world of sports. This type of organization was in fact a logical response to the established social order, though it may not have been chosen willingly. And once the women's emancipation movement was perceived as a threat to institutional domination by men, thereby throwing into question the social order, significant reactions on the part of sports leaders in general and Olympic leaders in particular were not long to follow. This article focuses on the reactions of Olympic leaders to the challenges registered by the women's emancipation movement to Olympic sport. Specifically, it seeks to concentrate on several key questions: What debates ensued within the IOC regarding the rise of women's sport and women's demands for equality? What arguments did these conservative aristocrats offer to justify rejecting or including women in the Olympic Games? What elements were believed by them to be at stake when they granted women athletes partial inclusion in the 1928 Olympics? What solutions were adopted by the leaders in the hope of returning to a more satisfactory social order?

The goal of this article is to show that the presidency of Henri de Baillet-Latour marked a turning-point in the history of women's participation in the Olympic Games, by presenting previously unstudied materials from the archives of the IOC [17], the FSFI [18], and from an earlier study of the IAAF. [19] The male hegemony of the Olympic institution was increasingly being called into question – in its social context and particularly its sports context. This challenge to the status quo led to

women's admission in Olympic competition but, paradoxically, the power of the Olympic leadership over women being strengthened. This was accomplished through a delicate strategy making use of the complementary powers of the IOC, the IAAF and their respective Presidents; it eventually led to the demise of the FSFI and consigned Alice Milliat to the past.

This work is divided into two sections. In the first, we explain how the development of women's sport between 1921 and 1926 incited the IAAF to take steps to control its growth by encouraging women's participation in the Olympic Games. We then examine the debates concerning the integration of women from 1926 onwards, as well as the different negotiations between the FSFI, the IAAF and the IOC regarding the rights of women athletes at the Games. This period of negotiation ended with the total absorption of the FSFI by the two other institutions in 1936.

### **The Birth of the FSFI and the Worries of the IAAF**

The first French women's track and field championships were organized in 1917 towards the end of the First World War. The most important outcome of these championships was the creation of the first French federation of women's athletics: the *Fédération des Sociétés Féminines Sportives de France* (FSFSF). The treasurer, Alice Milliat, thus began her career at the national level as a committed leader of women's sport. In June 1918, she became the general secretary and then was unanimously elected President of the Federation in March 1919. Her first act was to ask the IOC President – Pierre de Coubertin – to allow for women's participation in the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium. After a blunt refusal, the FSFSF leaders decided to organize a women's athletics competition that would be open to all countries. In March 1921, the first international women's athletics competition was held in Monte Carlo (Monaco) and brought together women from France, England, Italy, Norway and Sweden, countries in which women's sport had begun to show signs of progress. This international initiative was a frank success not only for the athletes, but also for the public [20] and the specialized press. Thus encouraged, the diverse women's federations soon united into an international federation, the *Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale*, at an inaugural congress on 31 October 1921 in Paris in the presence of French, American, English Czechoslovakian, Spanish, Austrian, Scandinavian and German representatives. The minutes of this meeting indicate that Alice Milliat played a key role in the debates and the initiatives undertaken. During the second congress on 18 August 1922, before the opening of the first 'Women's Olympic Games' in Paris, the skills and dedication of this Frenchwoman were recognized by all and she was named as the FSFI President:

Monsieur Anthoine thanked the international delegates for their work in furthering the cause of the FSFI, but declared that the flourishing health of the FSFI was in great part due to the activity of Madame Milliat. This pronouncement was met by applause from the congress attendees.... On proposal from the United States, Madame Alice Milliat was named president by acclamation. [21]

The federation members then made the decision to perpetuate the Women's Olympic Games by holding them every four years. This major decision displayed the federation's readiness to expand. Like all international organizations, it needed a regular world championship not only to justify its existence, but also to bring it into the public's eye. This decision also proved that the federation had attained a certain prominence. In fact, 38 countries representing five continents were already affiliated in 1922, and several nations still aspired to join. At this point, the women's federation had as many affiliated countries as the IAAF. Not least, the willingness to host the Women's Olympic Games every four years showed that women were seeking to position themselves in relation to the men's organization. According to the federation's minutes, it was not a question of 'doing the same as' but rather of taking a model that worked and adapting and improving it for the specifications of women. However, it may very well be that this decision was also a deliberate provocation to the IOC and its disdainful President, Coubertin.

Although the federation was deemed a success by women athletes the world over [22], it faced financial difficulties that were underlined during the third congress on 31 July 1924. The President noted that 'According to our statutes, a Congress should be held every year' but that 'because of our financial problems, we have decided that the Congress will be held every two years and, in the intervening years, the international committee will meet'. [23] Two years later, the financial question had become a major problem on the agenda for the federation's fourth congress:

Financial report – On July 31, 1926, the FSFI had 1,308 francs in its account; a bit more money remains to be collected but only prodigious efforts of economy have allowed the Federation to survive to date with such meagre resources. The Congress members agree that an increase in financial resources is needed and they are looking for ways to accomplish this. [24]

The subsequent minutes unfortunately cast no light on the solutions to this major problem. It is interesting to note, however, that this is the exact year that the IAAF entered into contact with the FSFI. Was this purely by chance? At this point, the FSFI had the human means, but not the financial means, to hold regular international competitions. [25] Moreover, track and field events were the major events in women's competitions. These are quite likely some of the reasons that the federation attracted the attention of the men's track and field federation. Before 1921, women's track and field interested very few of the IAAF leaders. But when the FSFI was created and then quickly developed to the point of having as many affiliated countries as the IAAF in 1926, this anomaly came to the attention of the IAAF leadership and was seen by certain sections as a symbolic threat calling the social order into question. [26]

The financial argument seems to be an important key to understanding the relationships between men and women in the world of sport. In any case, money provided a supplementary means for men to control women's sport by the withholding or granting of subsidies. In fact, the financial problems of the FSFI

precipitated the meeting of the three institutions. Materially weakened, the women leaders finally had little choice but to become subject to the male order, despite their valiant efforts to maintain autonomy.

### **Women's Inclusion in the Olympic Games: A Cleverly Laid Trap**

The Women's Olympic Games were among the first matters that Henri de Baillet-Latour had to deal with when he became IOC President in the autumn of 1925. From the first meeting of the IOC Executive Board on 3 to 6 November 1925, the Women's Olympic Games were an item on the agenda. However, the stated goal was not to hinder these Games or gain control of them. Only the name was a point of contention:

Women's Olympic Games – [the Executive Board] was quite upset to find that the name 'Olympic' has been unrightfully appropriated by the organizers of the Women's Games and it will take the necessary steps to obtain the help of the international federations so that this designation, which is the property of the IOC, is exclusively reserved for the Games organized by the IOC the first year of every Olympiad. [27]

The same statement was issued to the organizers of the 'Student Olympic Games', which seems to prove that the board members' request was independent of any consideration of gender. President Baillet-Latour explained in a memo written to the IOC members on 8 December 1925: 'The IOC, far from being hostile to the development of sport among students and young women, can only regard with favour the efforts being made to stimulate physical education for them. Our only protest is the abusive use of the terms "Olympic Games, Olympiads, and Olympic Committee"'. [28]

Women's sport was thus not specifically targeted; however, the preference for 'physical education' rather than sport should be noted. This distinction was not without significance. Up until the Second World War, physicians in particular commonly recommended physical education for the health of society's 'weakest' members – children and women – instead of sport, which was judged too violent and risky. Baillet-Latour's opinion echoed that of Coubertin and thus seemed to conform to his social position and gender: he wanted no involvement in the development of women's sport but nevertheless reserved for himself the right to orient it – in a direction that was devaluing to women. The record of evidence of attitude of Sigfried Edström that is preserved in the IOC Historic Archives begins with documents dated 1926 and are even more offensive. The record shows that from this date onwards, the President of the IAAF was engaged in a struggle as both federation President and IOC Board member: with the FSFI, but also with the IOC.

Edström's first goal as IAAF President was to convince his colleagues on the IOC Executive Board to accept some women's track and field events in the Olympic Games programme. In fact, to organize the Games, each international sport federation recognized by the IOC had to submit a programme of events to the



Executive Board, then to the membership of the IOC. The archives show that throughout Baillet-Latour's presidency, all decisions taken by the Executive Board were systematically endorsed by the rest of the committee. [29] This effectively concentrated great decision-making power in the hands of a small number of men. In March 1926, Edström expressed his federation's opinion that four women's track and field events should be authorized for the 1928 Olympic Games. Remarkably, this request was made without any preliminary consultation with the FSFI. Here, the leaders of men's athletics made no attempt to hide their meddling in the organization of women's athletics, despite the fact that the women wanted to be independent of male control. The motives of Edström and his federation are clear: to gain control of women's track and field sports and, by extension, of any and all sports linked with athletics.

Despite the small number of events requested, the Swede's proposal was hesitantly greeted by his Executive Board colleagues, who postponed their decision to the next IOC plenary meeting. During the Olympic session in Lisbon in May 1926, the decision was finally made that the 'committee will admit a limited number of women to athletics competition in the Olympic Games'. [30] A narrow breach thus appeared in the hitherto entirely male programme of the Olympic Games, without the women leaders even being informed in advance. However, Reginald John Kentish, a British IOC member, lucidly and prophetically announced that 'the women's federations will [not] be satisfied by the IAAF's proposal to admit women to four events'. [31]

The FSFI and Alice Milliat were contacted by Edström shortly after the Executive Board meeting of March 1926. The principal objective of the international committee of the FSFI, which met on 28 April 1926, was to prepare for the next day's meeting with the IAAF members. Alice Milliat clarified that the discussions recently and unofficially started with the men's federation were at the initiative of Edström: 'Mr. Edström's proposal consists simply of the dissolution of the FSFI and the creation of a commission to oversee women's athletics, the members of which would be appointed by the IAAF'. [32] Nothing was said about the steps undertaken with the IOC. Even though the IAAF had deftly suggested the inclusion of certain 'leading members of the FSFI' in this commission, the proposal aroused a sentiment of revolt in the women's federation: 'All the federations are unanimous in wishing to maintain the autonomy of the FSFI. In particular, Great Britain, Switzerland, Italy, and Czechoslovakia vehemently and at length protested against the demands of the IAAF'. [33]

It was thus decided that

the FSFI does not want to be dissolved, given the degree of success it has achieved. As a last resort, the creation of a technical commission composed of members from both federations [FSFI and IAAF] will be proposed to the IAAF, as well as the acceptance of a delegation of powers to the FSFI.

It was also planned that 'if we come to an understanding with the IAAF, the committee will drop the title of "Olympic Games" and replace it with "Women's Games"'. [34]

Despite the initial protests of the federation's women members, it is surprising to note that the leaders were ready to give up a part of their autonomy to the male federation. The argument advanced was that they were willing to 'do anything to avoid conflict with the IAAF'. [35] One can also imagine that the FSFI was seeking credibility. A male 'protectorate' would encourage the political and institutional powers of different countries to better subsidize the women's federations, for example. Once they had united into a single federation, the FSFI leaders were always careful to ensure that women had the majority vote in any decision-making body, but they also kept men aboard to facilitate their relations with the exterior. Keenly aware of the importance of doing this in a society where men held all the power, the FSFI leadership may also have used this logic in planning their proposal for the technical commission.

This critical meeting with the representatives of the IAAF was held the following day [36] and yielded the agreement expected by the FSFI leaders:

The FSFI will direct the women's track and field sports in compliance with an advisory delegation of the IAAF. It will conform to the technical rules decreed by the IAAF, who will appoint a special commission for this, as well as for all decisions of a general order concerning this sport. [37]

The concrete value of this text was technical: it allowed women's athletics competition to be based on established sports regulations, which made it possible, for example, to ratify new world records. Satisfied with the agreement, the women leaders were ready to abandon the title 'Women's Olympic Games'. From then on, unaware of having opened wide the door to male control, Alice Milliat and her FSFI colleagues were locked into a process that would bring about their end.

The leaders discovered the IAAF's intentions only in August 1926, [38] during their fourth Congress: 'The President reported on the conversation that she had yesterday afternoon, August 28, with Mr Edström and Professor Kjellmann regarding this subject [incorporating women's competition into the Olympic Games of Amsterdam]. She declared that the FSFI had never made such a request'. [39]

The news provoked wide debate among federation members. The signatories of the IAAF agreement confirmed that participation in the Olympic Games had never been implied during the negotiations. Alice Milliat added that

in her opinion, women's participation in the Olympic Games can only make sense if it is total, since women's athletics has proved itself and does not want to serve as an experiment for the Olympic Committee. If women's participation is so limited, it will not serve the cause of making women's athletics better known. [40]

The English representative, Sophie Elliott-Lynn, equally and energetically defended the autonomy of the women's athletics movement. [41] Certain FSFI members (men) were not opposed to women's participation in the Olympiads. To curtail debate, decisions were postponed until the next meeting of the federation's international committee. While waiting, Alice Milliat entered into contact with Baillet-Latour.

Instead of negotiating with the IAAF members to try and convince them to go back on their decision to include women's competition in the track and field programme, Milliat chose to address the IOC directly to defend the interests of the women athletes. Instead of arguing for the removal of women from the Olympic Games, she asked that they participate fully (that is, in as many competitions as at the Women's Games). This particular decision by Alice Milliat reveals her unwillingness to enter into conflict with the IAAF, as well as her hope perhaps that, should the IOC accept her request, the FSFI would be able to resolve its financial problems. Unfortunately, on both counts the FSFI President would be disappointed.

Between 20 November 1926 and 27 April 1927, 11 letters were exchanged by Alice Milliat and the IOC. The FSFI President had two demands: she wanted the promise of full and regular participation of women in Olympic track and field events and a total recognition of the FSFI at the same level as all the other international federations affiliated with the IOC. Specifically, she argued that two full days be devoted to women athletes during the 1928 Games and that all 12 women's track and field events from the Women's Games be integrated into the Olympic Games by 1932. Lastly, the President sought to have the FSFI members serve on the national Olympic committees (NOCs).

Faced with these fervent demands, Baillet-Latour tried to stall by postponing the study of these questions to the annual Olympic session of April 1927 where, finally, the IOC members ably entrenched themselves behind the Olympic regulations. Their response was that the decision to increase the size of the women's Olympic programme could only be made by the international federations. Since the IOC only recognized one federation per sport, this meant that the FSFI had to turn to the IAAF. A further argument was that only the NOCs decided on their membership and that the IOC could thus not intervene at this level. Given these replies, one might think that the IOC had only a limited decision-making capacity, which was obviously not the case. Its members could indeed choose the number of women's events, and each, as a member of his country's NOC, could intervene to help FSFI leaders to serve on the NOCs. But Alice Milliat once again ran into the brick wall of a closed system whose regulations perfectly protected it from outsiders. The IOC knew how to protect its Executive Board, which itself exercised power over the international federations and NOCs, which in turn reinforced and protected the power of the Executive Board. This strategy of protection was the expression of a hegemonic masculine conservatism. Women's sport was never once openly disapproved of in the course of the IOC's meetings with the FSFI. However, at other moments, the opinions of the IOC President, Henri de Baillet-Latour, and Executive Board member Sigfrid Edström were made clear. Women could participate in the Olympic Games only on condition that they in no way cast a shadow over the men. The Executive Board was, for example, very attentive to the ratio of men to women in each sports discipline. In 1927 and 1933, the international federations of gymnastics and swimming were called to order because their ratios were deemed too favourable to the women. [42] For the Olympic leaders, women athletes were welcome, but only on

condition that the men remain dominant and that the women respect the existing social order.

Women's participation further declined when the IOC was faced with the problem of 'gigantism' in the Games. Sigfried Edström did not hesitate to propose the total removal of women, revealing himself to be, along with Baillet-Latour, one of the leaders most resistant to women's sport. This radical view was underlined by Adams in her citation of a letter from the IAAF President: 'I suppose you know that Mme Milliat's Federation has caused us so much trouble that we certainly have no interest at all to support it. We should like the whole thing to disappear from the surface of the earth'. [43] Baillet-Latour, however, was well aware of the difficulty of imposing his point of view:

I can only hope for one thing: to soon see the day when women are completely freed from the tutelage of men so that they can organize their own worldwide Women's Games, because this would allow us to exclude them completely from the Olympic Games. I would have made the proposal in Berlin last year if I hadn't been absolutely sure of having no chance of seeing it passed. [44]

As he could not totally remove the women, the IOC President proposed a limited number of socially acceptable sports for them: swimming, gymnastics, tennis and figure skating, and rejected all activities that were judged too energetic or not aesthetic. [45] But in this period between the two world wars, the men's leaders were actually divided on the issue of participation of women in the Olympics. Certain leaders seemed to recognize their demands as legitimate, while others, such as the IAAF, only wanted to better control them. Whatever the case, this division prevented the disappearance of women from the Olympic Games in the inter-war period.

In 1928, the Olympic Games of Amsterdam had 277 women participating, more than three times as many as at the previous Women's Games in Göteborg (Sweden) in 1926, and this was despite the more restricted number of events and a boycott by the British women's federation. [46] The first official participation of women was thus a success, but to the future detriment of the FSFI. At the next Olympic Games, in 1932 in Los Angeles, and then in 1936 in Berlin, the number of events barely increased, but the rise in the number of women continued: 126 women travelled to the United States despite the distance and 331 women went to Germany. The introduction of competition at the Olympic Games thus sounded the eventual death knell for the FSFI. Meanwhile, as its leadership continued the struggle to survive financially and organize the Women's Games, the tutelage of the men's federations allowed these to control the numbers and practices of women in the Olympic Games and to respond to the athletes' financial needs, which Alice Milliat's federation could no longer do. In 1928, the French government reduced its subsidies to the FSFI by two-thirds. The Women's Games were held in Prague in 1930 and then again in London in 1934, but the battle-weary Alice Milliat soon quit the federation, and on 6 August 1936 the FSFI vanished with her while the Berlin Games were in full swing.

## **Conclusion**

The brief existence of the FSFI (from 1921 to 1936) was enough to create the momentum and international unity needed for the growth of women's sport between the two world wars. The repeated, regular and successful organization of the Women's Games was a source of worry for the men's sports movement: the domination and power of men in organized sport were threatened in the face of the women's demands. The IAAF leaders, seeing the opportunity to benefit from the federation's financial weakness, provoked the entrance of women athletes into the Olympic Games with the sole goal of better controlling its development. This manoeuvre was against the will of the women's leaders. It brought about the death throes of the Women's Games and eventually of the FSFI, despite the constant and active opposition of its President, Alice Milliat, and the particularly vocal British members. The tragic destiny of this federation was the work of the men's sports movement, in particular through the combined forces of the IAAF and the IOC. This shared history of three international sports institutions highlights the major role of the Swede Sigfried Edström, who used his dual membership in the IAAF and the IOC to subjugate women in Olympic sport. It also reveals the profound disdain of this leader for women athletes, who were perceived to be threats to the established social order. The members of the IOC, even when divided on the issue of women's sport, all ultimately supported the social principle of women's domination by men. Whether they wanted to see a complete separation between the women's and men's sports movements, like IOC President Henri de Baillet-Latour, or preferred to integrate the women in order to better control them, like the majority of members, one principle was common to them all: sport is the affair best led by men. After the Second World War and the death of Henri de Baillet-Latour, Sigfried Edström became President of the IOC and remained so until 1952. He was then succeeded by his good friend Avery Brundage, who would carry forward the Olympic tradition of stringent control over women that had occurred during the period between the two wars into his presidency, much to the detriment of women athletes.

As a final note, it should be added that this shared history emphasizes the asymmetry at the heart of the men's and women's sports movements. Although this period between the two World Wars is an important time in the history of worldwide women's sport, it is but an anecdote in the IOC's overall history, threatened at the time by the growing power of international federations, the incessant debates about amateurism versus professionalism and the thorny problem of preparing for the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936. [47]

## **Acknowledgements**

This study was made possible through a grant from the Postgraduate Research Grant Programme of the IOC Olympic Studies Centre, located in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland. All translations are our own.

## Notes

- [1] Since 1991, all new sports included in the Olympic programme must have women's events. In 1995, the first 'women and sport' working group was created among the IOC members to promote women's admission to the Olympic Games, as well as to the general sport movement, but only in 2004 under the presidency of Jacques Rogge did it become a permanent commission of the IOC.
- [2] According to the IOC, on its website in 2006, [www.olympic.org/uk/organisation/missions/women/activities/women\\_uk.asp](http://www.olympic.org/uk/organisation/missions/women/activities/women_uk.asp)
- [3] 'The Games organization enabled its members to make decisions regardless of external influences': Mitchell, 'Women's Participation', 209.
- [4] Count Henri de Baillet-Latour became President of the IOC in 1925, after the resignation of Pierre de Coubertin, and remained so until his death in 1942. He was born in Brussels in 1876. King Leopold of Belgium offered him the opportunity to organize and direct sport in Belgium. He presided over the National Committee on Physical Education, which oversaw all Belgian sports federations. In 1903, he joined the IOC and the following year he founded the Belgian Olympic Committee. The count organized the Third Olympic Congress in Brussels in 1905. Through his influence and personal competence, he was able to organize the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, despite the difficult post-war context. The result of this success was that Baillet-Latour became an increasingly influential member of the IOC. He became a member of the new IOC Executive Board that was created in 1921, and he was 49 years old when he was elected by a wide majority to succeed Coubertin as IOC President in 1925.
- [5] Henri de Baillet-Latour was President of the IOC until 1942. Because of the Second World War, however, the Committee's work was substantially curtailed from 1939 through to 1946.
- [6] For this topic, see Carpentier, *Le Comité International Olympique en Crises*.
- [7] Maternity was the principal concern behind this argument. The strength of a nation was greatly dependent on the health of its childbearing women, and this was a major preoccupation of the Third French Republic (1870–1936).
- [8] 'Whereas for men's sport, the vast majority is there to watch the sport so that the lowest of the low in the crowd can be ignored, it will always be different for women's sport.... There is nothing to learn by watching them; also, those who assemble in this goal do so for reasons having little to do with sport': Coubertin, *Pédagogie sportive*, 114.
- [9] Traditionally, the sports on the Olympic programme posed no problem for women's participation as they were deemed 'socially' acceptable. Tennis, golf, sailing, archery and equestrian were aristocratic sports. For the aristocrats of the end of the nineteenth century, it was normal for women to join men in their leisure activities. The playing field thus became a place for meeting and socializing among individuals of the same social origins. Artistic skating, swimming and diving were also within the norms established for women in the period between the two world wars. Skating and diving had a strong aesthetic component that was closely associated with femininity. Swimming, on the other hand, was perceived as an essentially health-oriented practice at the beginning of the twentieth century and was thus deemed important for women, for the reasons cited above.
- [10] Mitchell, 'Women's Participation,' 211–2.
- [11] Alice Milliat was born on 5 May 1884, in Nantes, France, to middle-class parents. She studied to become a teacher. Her interest in sport certainly predates the First World War, as during the war she was an active member of the French club Femina Sport. In the years between the two wars, she was a well-known personality in women's sport, active as a leader and very much present for the athletes. She was 38 years old when she became President of the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale in 1922. She died in Paris in 1957. For a biography (though quite incomplete), see Leigh and Bonin's 'The Pioneering Role of Madame Alice Milliat' and Drevon's *Alice Milliat*.

- [12] Minutes of the fourth Congress of the FSFI, 27–29 Aug. 1926, Göteborg, Archives du Musée National du Sport, Paris, France (hereafter AMNS).
- [13] Pierre de Coubertin remained hostile to the participation of women athletes throughout his life. This was displayed in 1935, two years before his death, in his radio speech of 4 August in Berlin: ‘To my eyes, the true Olympic hero is the *individual male adult*’. (Coubertin, ‘The Philosophic Foundation of Modern Olympism’, 13).
- [14] Despite the claim, for example, of Uriel Simri (‘The Development of Female Participation’).
- [15] Sigfried Edström was born on 21 November 1870, in Göteborg, Sweden. He studied engineering in Sweden and Switzerland before going on to become in 1903 the President of the largest electrical company in Sweden. As a committed athlete, he also became involved in developing and organizing sport in his country as President of the Swedish Gymnastics and Sports Association and the Swedish Amateur Athletic Association. Most importantly, he was the founder-President of the IAAF (1913–46). His Olympic career began in 1920 with simple membership, when he was 50 years old. In 1921, he was elected to the new Executive Board of the IOC. He became its vice-President in 1937 and then served as its President after the Second World War until 1952.
- [16] The English and American feminist movements appeared at their most virulent just before 1914, at which point they seemed to lose steam and remained disorganized through the 1920s and 1930s. In contrast, the French feminists made greater demands in the post-First World War years. For an overview of the different feminist movements in America and Western Europe, see Thébaud, *Histoire des Femmes en Occident, Le XXe Siècle*; Evans, *Born for Liberty*; Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*; or Katzenstein and McClurg Muller, *The Women’s Movements of the United States and Western Europe*.
- [17] In addition to the minutes of the diverse committee meetings, this concerns essentially all the active and passive correspondence of the President, Henri de Baillet-Latour, and the members of the IOC Executive Board between 1925 and 1940.
- [18] The FSFI archives are conserved at the Musée National du Sport, Paris, France. They comprise all the minutes from meetings and congresses between 1921 and 1936, the period of its existence.
- [19] See the references.
- [20] Twenty thousand spectators attended the first Games, according to Leigh and Bonin, ‘The Pioneering Role of Madame Alice Milliat’.
- [21] Minutes of the second Congress of the FSFI, Paris, 18 Aug. 1922 (AMNS).
- [22] For financial and material reasons, the 1926 Göteborg Games had fewer participants than the 1922 Paris Games – 81 as against 101. In contrast, from 1922 onwards the number of participating countries and athletic events continued to grow and the duration of the Games was extended (from a single day in 1921 and 1922 to three days in 1926).
- [23] Minutes of the third congress of the FSFI, Paris, 31 July 1924 (AMNS).
- [24] Minutes of the fourth congress of the FSFI, Göteborg, Sweden, 27–29 Aug. 1926 (AMNS).
- [25] The organization of the 1926 Göteborg Games was made possible by private funding. The French women’s delegation, which was overlooked by the male sport authorities, also had to raise private funds to send the athletes to Sweden. For this reason, only eight French women were in the delegation, although there were 50 in 1921.
- [26] ‘The success of the Games [of 1921] increased the awareness and fears of both the IOC and the IAAF’, according to Adams, ‘Fighting for Acceptance’, 144.
- [27] Minutes of the IOC Executive Board, Paris, 5 Nov. 1925 (IOC Archives, Lausanne, Switzerland, hereafter AIOC).
- [28] Memo from Henri de Baillet-Latour, 8 Dec. 1925, Baillet-Latour/Blonay, correspondence, 1915–37 (AIOC).
- [29] See Carpentier, *Le Comité International Olympique en crises*.

- [30] Minutes of the Olympic session of the IOC, Lisbon, 6 May 1926, 25th session of Lisbon, 1926 (AIOC).
- [31] Reginald John Kentish, IOC Executive Board minutes, Paris, 7 March 1926 (AIOC).
- [32] Minutes of FSFI international committee meeting, Paris, 28 April 1926 (AMNS).
- [33] Ibid.
- [34] Ibid.
- [35] Ibid.
- [36] The IAAF was represented by its President, Sigfried Edström; a Frenchman, Joseph Genet; and a Belgian, Wydemans. The FSFI was represented by its President, Alice Milliat; a British member, Major Marchand; and a Czechoslovakian, V. Valousek. The only woman present to defend the women's cause, Alice Milliat, also served as the 'secretary' of the meeting. Minutes of the IAAF-FSFI commission, Paris, 29 April 1926 (AMNS).
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Despite the fact that the decision to systematically distribute the minutes of the IOC meetings was made in November, 1925, in 1926 they were not always widely distributed. Those who wanted access to them had to pay a fee of ten Swiss francs per year. Not surprisingly, Alice Milliat and the FSFI leaders found it difficult to stay abreast of all decisions concerning them.
- [39] Minutes of the fourth FSFI congress, Göteborg, 29 Aug. 1926 (AMNS).
- [40] Ibid.
- [41] See Duval, 'The Development of Women's Track and Field'.
- [42] The International Gymnastics Federation authorized the participation of 16 to 18 women and seven or eight men at the 1928 Olympic Games. The swimming programme of the 1936 Olympic Games comprised nine events for men and seven for women. Minutes of the IOC Executive Board meetings, Lausanne, 31 Oct. 1927, and Vienna, 5 June 1933 (AIOC).
- [43] Letter from Sigfried Edström to Avery Brundage, 3 Jan. 1935, ABC Box 42, reel 24 (Archives of the International Centre for Olympic Studies, University of Western Ontario, Canada), cited by Adams, 'Fighting for Acceptance', 144.
- [44] Letter from Henri de Baillet-Latour to Godefroy de Blonay, 31 Aug. 1931, Baillet-Latour, correspondence, 1931–38 (AIOC).
- [45] Minutes of IOC Executive Board meeting, Lausanne, 11 June 1932 (AIOC).
- [46] See Wamsley and Schultz, 'Rogues and Bedfellows', 115.
- [47] See Carpentier, *Le Comité International Olympique en Crises*.

## References

- Adams, Carly. 'Fighting for Acceptance: Sigfrid Edström and Avery Brundage: Their Efforts to Shape and Control Women's Participation in the Olympic Games'. Paper presented at the Sixth International Symposium for Olympic Research, 2002: 143–8.
- Carpentier, Florence. *Le Comité International Olympique en Crises* [The International Olympic Committee through its Crises]. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004.
- Cott, N.F. *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Coubertin, Pierre de. *Pédagogie Sportive*. Paris: G. Crès, 1922.
- . 'The Philosophic Foundation of Modern Olympism'. *Revue Olympique* 14 (1949).
- Drevon, André. *Alice Milliat, la Pasionaria du Sport Féminin* [Alice Milliat, the Pasionaria of Women's Sport]. Paris: Vuibert, 2005.
- Duval, Lynne. 'The Development of Women's Track and Field in England: The Role of the Athletic Club, 1920s–50s'. *The Sports Historian* 1 (2001): 1–34.
- Evans, S. *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America*. New York: Free Press, 1989.



- Katzenstein, M.F. and C. McClurg Muller, eds. *The Women's Movements of the United States and Western Europe: Consciousness, Political Opportunity and Public Policy*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1986.
- Leigh, Mary H. and Thérèse M. Bonin. 'The Pioneering Role of Madame Alice Milliat and the FSFI in Establishing International Trade and Field Competition for Women'. *Journal of Sport History* 1 (1977): 72–83.
- Mitchell, Sheila. 'Women's Participation in the Olympic Games 1900–26'. *Journal of Sport History* 2 (1977): 208–28.
- Simri, Uriel. 'The Development of Female Participation in the Modern Olympic Games'. *Stadion* 4 (1980): 187–216.
- Thébaud, F., ed. *Histoire des Femmes en Occident, Le XXe Siècle* [Women's History in the West; Twentieth Century]. Paris: Plon, 2002.
- Wamsley, Kevin B. and Guy Schultz. 'Rogues and Bedfellows: The IOC and the Incorporation of the FSFI'. Paper presented at the Fifth International Symposium for Olympic Research, 2000: 113–8.