

Women's History

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Olympic Women

Records of the ancient Olympics date from 776 B.C. until they were banned toward the end of the 4th century A.D. Women were not included and were excluded to the end. Pausanis wrote that “virgins were not refused admissions as spectators,” but married women were not admitted on pain of death.

Women also were barred completely from the first modern-day Olympics held in Athens in 1896. Nineteen women, allowed to compete in golf, tennis and yachting, made their debut in 1900 at the games in Paris. Female athletes were accepted as long as they remained “ladylike.”

The 1920 Olympic Games saw more women competing in more events but there remained restrictions and reprimands. U.S. figure skater Theresa Weld was scolded for including a salchow (jump) in her program. Women competed in tennis, swimming and diving, but track and field events were still considered masculine sports, “dangerous to the feminine nature” and better left to men with strength and speed.

Five track and field events for women were added in the 1928 Olympics but tennis was barred until 1988. This was also the first year of the Winter Games. The only competition open to women was figure skating.

The first American Olympic Games, held in L.A. in 1932, included the first Olympic Village. The village was for men only. No new sports for women, but two track and field events were added. Louise Stokes and Tidy Pickett, two African-American women, qualified but were not allowed to participate. Babe Didrikson was one of 127 women allowed to compete. In three hours, she won five events, tied a sixth, and chalked up two world records. The press called it “the most amazing series of performances ever accomplished by an individual, male or female, in track and field history.” The 1936 Games in Berlin added gymnastics, the new sport for women.

Wilma Rudolph earned a place on the 1956 U.S. Women's Olympic team in Melbourne and won a bronze medal. Time magazine wrote of Rudolph “...she was the fastest woman the world had ever seen.” In 1960, Rudolph was the first American woman to win a gold medal since 1936, when Elizabeth Robinson, of Riverdale, Illinois, won the first female track gold medal.

African-American, Rudolph became an American icon embraced by people of all races the world over. In her speech, she pledged to use her physical talents to the “glory of God, the best interests of my nation, and the honor of womanhood.”

Women dominated the 1998 Olympics in Japan, winning 4 of the 6 gold medals. Team USA won the first ever Olympic gold medal in women's hockey, in a hundred-year struggle to gain recognition and respect for women's hockey--and in many ways, all female athletes in North America where the sport was often viewed with a wink as sportscasters and rink-side pundits would say, "not bad, for "the girls." But the networks suffered the worst Olympics ratings in 30 years. Anheuser-Busch felt programming ignored male viewers, a spokesman said, "You have to make sure women are intrigued with the Olympics. But we're now concerned that the pendulum is so far over that the 21- to-34-year old male is saying that 'you're not talking to me anymore.'"

In 2002, more than 3,000 women competed in a growing number of sports. As role models to the millions of women watching, they demonstrated that being "ladylike" was no longer the only definition of a woman.

In 2004, women will have their own competitions in every sport category but boxing. Female wrestling debuts. And men and women will compete against each other in sailing and equestrian events, as they have for many years. The USA women's basketball team is expected to dominate as the historic Olympic Games return to Athens with Grace and Glory and Dawn and Diana and Lisa and Tina and Sheryl and Shannon and Tamika and Sue and Swin and Yolanda and Katie and Ruth and...

Sources:

Grace & Glory: A Century of Women in the Olympics, Jan Leder.
Nike is a Goddess: The History of Women in Sports, ed. Lissa Smith.
Chicago Tribune, February 24, 1998.
National Geographic, August, 2004.