

Paris to Beijing: Women were barred from participating in the ancient Olympic games as well as in the first modern-day Olympics in Athens-1896. Women's first Olympic participation happened in the Paris 1900 Olympic Games that were part of the Exposition Universelle Internationale - the Paris World's Fair.

Many competitors did not know if their event was part of the World Exposition or the Olympics. The games were or were not given Olympic status, depending on historic records cited. The French exposition organizers were *lassiez faire* in their organizing and women entered events without opposition. The newly formed all-male International Olympic Committee was against women participating, but these men had little influence in Paris.

It is generally agreed that the first women to compete in the Olympics were Filleaul Brohy and Marie Ohnier of France who competed against men in the sport of croquet, an Olympic event only that year. In tennis, Charlotte Cooper of England, a three time Wimbledon champion, won both singles and mixed doubles championships and became the first female Olympic gold medal winner, albeit she did not receive a "medal." Medals were first awarded in the 1904 Olympics, and it is written that women were the prizes in men's Ancient Olympic chariot races. Chicagoan Margaret Ives Abbott was the first American female Olympic champion. However, because of the political confusion over status, Abbott lived and died never knowing of her historic accomplishment. In 2008 Beijing, swimmer Natalie du Toit of South Africa, is the first disabled athlete, female or male, to qualify for the Olympic Games.

Tennis, withdrawn after the 1924 Games, reappeared in 1984 as a demonstration event, won by fifteen-year old Steffi Graf. When reinstated as an official event in 1988, Graf again won, this time the gold medal. Archery was included in the 1904 St. Louis Olympic Games where women's boxing happened as a demonstration. Two swimming events and highboard diving for women were included in 1912. Fencing for women was added in 1924. Gymnastics appeared as a team sport in 1928, but not as an individual event until 1952. The women's pentathlon event was introduced in the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Women's and men's individual motocross (BMX) and 10-kilometer marathon in swimming will appear in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. As well, women's teams in soccer, field hockey and handball have been increased from ten to twelve teams with women's events added in equestrian and fencing competitions.

The International Olympic Committee is committed to gender equity in the Olympics. Only two of twenty-eight Olympic events are not open to women, boxing and baseball. However, the IOC cut softball from future Olympics. And the IOC, itself? Well, men only comprised the initial committee with no women members until 1981. Women numbered 12 of the 155 members in 2005, and today the IOC member gender balance is an inequitable 15-140.

Age as well as gender bears an Olympic history of note. The oldest known American woman to have competed in the Summer Olympics is equestrian Kyra Downton who, at age 55, competed in the 1968 Games in Mexico City. In Beijing, the oldest American woman to compete is Libby Callahan (56) in the shooting events. Callahan also competed in the 1992, 1996 and 2004 Olympic Games.

After her Olympic tennis championships in 1900, Cooper took off time for family, then won her fifth Wimbledon singles title in 1908 at the age of 37 years 282 days, a age record that still stands. In 1912, at age 41, she continued to be one of the best players and advanced to the Wimbledon finals.

In 2008, at age 41, Dara Torres has qualified for her fifth Olympics after a six-year hiatus from competition that included the birth of her daughter. This is Torres' second Olympic comeback. After a previous seven-year layoff, she won two relay golds and three individual bronze medals at age 33, the oldest 2000 U.S. Olympic team member.

Torres' swimming successes of the summer add beautiful strokes to a perpetually wet-paint mural of women's sports history. And while Torres may swim alone, swimmingly adding strokes to women's history, she is not alone in the pool of historic Olympic women, Paris to Beijing.

Read: 'Olympic Women' August 2004 and 'SportsWomanship' February 2005.

Sources: <http://hnn.us/articles/572.html>,
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