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# Part One: The Influence of Fashion. Chapter 5, Women Enter the Olympics: A Sleeker Swimsuit

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WOMEN ENTER  
THE  
*Olympics*

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A Sleeker Swimsuit

SO FAR WE HAVE LOOKED AT THE LONG, SLOW GROWTH OF WOMEN'S involvement in sporting activities. Clothes certainly played their part. But nowhere is their influence more evident than in the Olympic Games. And nowhere else can we see quite so clearly the position of women at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, no matter what the trends of the previous half century might suggest. Anyone living today within reach of TV knows how important new developments in textile and clothing designs are for the success of athletes competing in the Games. We saw in the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City the skin-tight racing suits worn by men and women alike, sleek and aerodynamic, capable of shaving precious milliseconds off time. That they enhanced beautiful bodies was almost an afterthought, although I'm sure no one who watched failed to enjoy that aspect of the new designs. We have taken technological advances and used them to serve speed as their products wrap bodies in garments that would have been unthinkable even a generation ago.<sup>1</sup> Hand in hand with this development has been the equally stunning acceptance of women as competitors, as athletes. Although women's competition became a media event as early as the 1996 Summer Games, when women were hailed as the stars who would outshine the men, it took a century to achieve this equality.<sup>2</sup>

In the beginning, in keeping with the ancient Greek tradition, the modern Olympic Games were all male. Only gradually over the course of the twentieth century did women enter the competition. Yet in the paeans to women's strength and athleticism that filled the popular press prior to the Centennial Games in 1996, the question of women's rare appearances during the first twenty-four years, from 1896 to 1920, was never raised. The total number of female participants in those first six Games amounted to less than 2 percent of the entire field.<sup>3</sup> Even at the turn of the present century, women's involvement is still little better than 35 percent. Why has this been so?

In our own time, articles in the popular press calculated to generate female pride often feature beauty, appearance, and the aesthetics of women's bodies in sport rather than women's athletic accomplishments. For women, whose worth until very recently was measured by their value as wives, mothers, and keepers of the hearth, beauty and appearance have always been used as currency to achieve a better position. At the beginning of the twentieth century, appeals to these qualities were used as well to keep women from participating in competitive sports. It will come as no surprise that clothing was, too. By being prohibited from wearing functional clothing appropriate for specific sports, American women were literally prevented from entering events, let alone excelling in them. This chapter, then, is a brief history of American women's progress towards overcoming the societal restraints that severely limited their participation in the early Olympic Games. It is a story that sports historians and journalists alike have largely ignored.<sup>4</sup> In no small measure it revolves around clothing. And ultimately it centers more specifically on swimwear than on any other kinds of dress.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin first publicly proposed the modern Olympics in 1892 and spent the next three years gathering support for his idea. When he first dreamed of a rebirth of the Olympic Games, it never entered his mind that women might want to participate. His beliefs were quite the opposite. "Women have but one task," he said, "that of crowning the winner with garlands."<sup>5</sup> As late as 1912 he wrote, "The Olympic Games . . . [are] the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, art for its setting, and female applause as reward."<sup>6</sup> Even when he traveled to the United States in 1889

and visited colleges offering women's physical exercise programs, such as Wellesley and the University of California at Berkeley, his attitude was decidedly patronizing. "Americans find that women, too, have the right to physical exercises," he said. "And why not? Women need natural movements in the out-of-doors as much as men do."<sup>7</sup> His own writing expresses his views of women succinctly. "Women have probably proved that they are up to par with almost all the exploits to which men are accustomed," he wrote in 1902, "but they have not been able to establish that in doing so, they have remained faithful to the necessary conditions of their existence and obedient to the laws of nature." Furthermore, "the French, by heredity, by disposition, by taste, are opposed to the idea of the apparent equality of the two sexes. They will accept the principle of real equality as long as it does not display itself too boisterously in the open, and that, in the expression it takes, it will not shock their deep-rooted traditions."<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, to Coubertin gender was destiny. The very idea of equality for women countered everything the Frenchman believed in. And of course he was not alone. In the late nineteenth century, when societal expectations for women were still largely limited to home and family, Coubertin merely represented his time and place, his sex, and the general expectations of his peers. Indeed, he was reputed to hate the sight of women sweating, involved in violent effort, since it killed their mystery and reduced them to "painful grins that give them sexless faces and bodies."<sup>9</sup> As a result, there was not one woman among the 311 athletes who participated in the first modern Olympics, held in Athens in 1896.<sup>10</sup>

So strong was Coubertin's influence that the second Games, held in 1900, were in Coubertin's own city, Paris, rather than once again in Athens, as the Greeks had wanted. Here, in spite of his strongly held beliefs, we see the first inroads in the tentative introduction of women into certain events. The Paris Games drew 1,330 athletes, a thousand more than four years earlier in Athens. Of these, twelve were women—and it seems that even this was a fluke. No one can say exactly how they got in. Apparently, no records survive. Probably, however, the key lies in the haphazard administration of the Paris Games, held to coincide with the Paris Exposition of 1900.<sup>11</sup> Coubertin believed that the Games would be the capstone of that world's fair, captivating the throngs who attended it as the earlier games had enthralled the audience in Athens. Thus, he was willing to turn the planning over to

the Exposition committee. But these bureaucrats, who knew and cared nothing about sports, allowed the Games to become little more than a sideshow to the Exposition. The events dragged on for four to five months and were so poorly organized that several athletes who participated were not even aware that they were competing in the Olympics. In fact, the word “Olympics” never appeared in the official program.<sup>12</sup> In all likelihood, with the Games out of Coubertin’s control and the general shambles that ensued, the twelve women were either ignored or overlooked.

Even so, it is hard to imagine what it would have been like to be one of those twelve. Most of the other athletes, and certainly most of the officials, would have shared Coubertin’s views. Nonetheless, twelve women, representing Great Britain, France, Switzerland, Bohemia, and the United States, competed in golf and tennis. Margaret Abbott, age twenty-two, a five-foot-eleven socialite from the Chicago Golf Club who was studying art in Paris at the time, entered the nine-hole golf tournament at Compiègne and won. Later, she was credited with being the first American woman to win an Olympic medal, a gold, although in reality all she actually received was a ladylike gold-trimmed porcelain bowl.<sup>13</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, Margaret Abbott’s mother, a “noted novelist and editor,” also competed—possibly the first and last mother-daughter combination ever to do so. Abbott, in a graceful comment that sheds light on the quality of play, later claimed that she had won only because her French competitors “apparently misunderstood the nature of the game and turned up to play in high heels and tight skirts.” An extant photograph of the game reveals hatted, long-sleeved, and long-skirted women, golf clubs gripped and in action. Interestingly, Abbott’s comment emphasized the tightness of the dress, not its length.<sup>14</sup> One thing remains clear, though: the women competing were accorded neither team status, uniforms, nor any other kind of recognition by their respective Olympic committees; certainly the Abbotts were ignored by the American Olympic Committee (AOC).<sup>15</sup>

As we have seen, even by the turn of the century, women could not go out in public to participate in any sports activity with men while wearing anything but the traditional long skirt, shortened perhaps four to six inches to permit easier play. No surprise, then, that England’s Charlotte Cooper, the first woman to win an official Olympic gold medal, is shown in a photograph, her hair in a perfect pompadour, wearing the typical stiff, high-collared



Marathoners, St. Louis Olympic Games, 1904. Shorts and tank tops contrast sharply with the dragging skirts and high stiff collars women wore for sports. Courtesy of United States Olympic Committee.

shirtwaist and fitted-at-the-hip, gored skirt, tightly corseted, and belted at her narrow waist, displaying her tennis racquet to the photographer. A startled young Frenchman in Paris wrote to a friend after catching some of the events: “Brace yourself, my friend, women have participated in these games. . . . Our sportswomen were clad in white, elegant, pretty, and the racket they held in their hands did not just caress the ball! Their ardor and their endurance have astonished me!”<sup>16</sup> Men by contrast, bared their bodies far more, wearing fitted tank tops and narrow, above-the-knee shorts. The contrast in standards—and appearance—is evident.

The 1904 Games, held in St. Louis, were smaller, with only 617 athletes altogether, eight of whom were women. All eight were archers, a sport new to the Olympics, and all were American.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, most of the athletes were American. These Games, like the previous ones, were held to coincide with the St. Louis World’s Fair, and resulted in much the same debacle as the Paris Games.

In 1904 the American Olympic Committee was closely aligned with the American Athletic Union. The AAU secretary, James E. Sullivan, chaired the

organizing committees for both the all-male 1896 Athens team and the St. Louis Games. He shared Coubertin's views of women in sports, agreeing that participation was unwomanly, that women should not strain to excel, and that they certainly should not wear clothing that came above the ankle in order to play sports. Hence, tennis, golf, and archery were the only events possible for women, since these required only subtle modifications of the current fashionable dress. He was typical of his time, and was supported by all the men involved in the American Olympics movement and in sports generally. Even one of the more progressive men involved in sport and athletic pursuits, Luther Harvey Gulick, proposed in 1906 that "athletics for women should for the present be restricted to sport within the school; that they should be used for recreation and pleasure; that the strenuous training of teams tends to be injurious to both body and mind; that public, general competition emphasizes qualities that are on the whole unnecessary and undesirable. Let us then have athletics for recreation, but not for serious, public competition."<sup>18</sup> One can only imagine what the more conservative leaders in America thought. But their attitudes were put into action when it came to awards: women received diplomas for their successes; men won medals.<sup>19</sup>

Fortunately, somewhat more enlightened views prevailed abroad. The 1908 London Olympics admitted women in tennis, figure skating, and archery, which had replaced golf in 1904. Thirty-six out of 2,020 participants were women, most of them from the British Isles.<sup>20</sup> None was American. What caught the eye of the British press, though, were the Scandinavian women's gymnastic demonstration teams, who, though not strictly Olympians, certainly drew attention to women's athleticism. The *London Daily Telegraph* focused particularly on the Danish team, reporting that twenty or more Danish "ladies in neat gymnastic costume [were] instantly appreciated by the multitude, who gave vent to their admiration by prolonged applause." The reporter gave a rare description of their uniforms, thereby telling us by its very inclusion just how unusual the clothing was: "The presence of their party of ladies in white serge gymnastic costumes and pale brown stockings, without shoes, would of itself have arrested the multitude."<sup>21</sup> No question about that: those pale brown stockings no doubt gave the appearance of bare legs to that appreciative multitude.

These toeholds, small though they seem, and not part of the Olympic events proper, represented the beginnings of change. The Games held in



Finnish gymnasts, 1912 Olympics in Stockholm. The loose, unstructured, and unconfined dress, worn over bare legs and feet, was years ahead of its time. Fred Eugene Leonard, *History of Physical Education*, 1923.

Stockholm in 1912 reflected the more liberal attitudes of the Scandinavian countries, which had a strong history of women's participation in physical exercise.<sup>22</sup> Once again, Denmark and Finland, as well as the other Scandinavian countries, sent gymnastic teams to Stockholm. The Danes wore the same general style of costume they had worn in London four years before: a garment based on the baggy bloomer, American-style gymnastic suit. But the Finns' dress was nothing short of astonishing in such a venue. It was skirted, knee-length, short-sleeved, probably based on a costume for dance, and the women were bare-legged and barefoot—altogether remarkable for 1912. (I had a dress almost like it in the 1960s.)<sup>23</sup>

Members of the International Olympics Committee voted in their Luxembourg meeting in 1910 to introduce an even greater innovation at the Stockholm Olympics, one that would have lasting consequences: they agreed to include swimming events for women. The first was the women's 100-meter freestyle race.<sup>24</sup> At this point we should pause to remember how



far women's swimming and bathing dress had developed. Modesty had always taken precedence over common sense, but by the twentieth century, there was a marked distinction between the two and the clothing each supported. As we saw in Annette Kellerman's comments, made in 1910, American women by and large did not know how to swim. And the modesty factor was an even bigger problem in the United States than in Europe or Great Britain. Americans were far more prudish than their counterparts elsewhere, and the issue of immodesty was one of the chief arguments against allowing American women to enter competitions, especially in water sports. Besides, the U.S. Olympic Committee had voted down women's participation. So once again, in the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, American women did not participate.<sup>25</sup>

Some fifty-five others did, though, forty-one of them swimmers representing ten countries.<sup>26</sup> Among these were English swimmers and, most visibly, two Australians, Fanny Durack and Wilhemina (Mina) Wylie. It was they who won the gold and silver individual medals. They too had a difficult time in their struggle to convince authorities that they were worthy of representing their country in the Olympics. Much of the concern in Australia, as in America, centered on the question of modesty and morality, which ultimately came down to the symbol of costume suitable for mixed company. Finally, the young women were grudgingly accepted as part of the Australasian team, but only on the condition that they raise their own travel and support money. Australia refused to sponsor them, pleading insufficient funds even for all the men going.

The women's fight against a strong conservative tradition, represented, paradoxically, by Rose Scott, a powerfully militant "old" woman, makes a fascinating story. Scott's Victorian roots undergirded her "heavy sense of prudishness," as is most evident in the following anecdote: determined to protect the virtue of the young women swimmers, she arranged for a brass band to perform during a meet in Australia but made sure to hire one whose players were all blind. It seems odd, then, that Rose Scott is known as a great defender of women's rights, and "the mother of suffrage" in New South Wales. Apparently she was as socially conservative as she was politically liberal. She made her position perfectly clear: "We are essentially a clothes-wearing people. . . . It is immodest for ladies to appear on open beaches amongst men in attire so scant that they would be ashamed

to wear the same dress in their own drawing rooms.” Needless to say, she brought this view to bear against Durack and Wiley. Luckily for the swimmers, many in Australia supported them, though acknowledging the problem of dress. One writer to the *Daily Telegraph* suggested a solution: the swimmers “should not mix with the audience, and should wear long coats over their costumes whenever they were out of the water.”<sup>27</sup>

What did the 1912 swimsuits look like? And how revealing were they? What was causing all the concern among the sponsors? Were these still the multilayered costumes of the turn of the century, or had the women athletes devised new, more efficient swimwear to better meet the needs of competitive swimming? Perhaps it is helpful to look back at that other famous Australian swimmer, Annette Kellerman, in order to answer those questions. She had made a career of traveling and demonstrating her scandalous new suit, based on men’s gym wear, and of inspiring girls and women to swim. The Western world knew her and her costume. The two girls from New South Wales could scarcely have avoided knowing of her. Certainly she influenced many, and her crusade to educate women about the pleasure of swimming must have helped Fanny and Mina’s cause. But perhaps her influence was in the deed, not the dress. Photographs of their costumes make it clear that these two women chose not to copy Kellerman’s style. They followed other swimmers instead—not women but men.

A photograph exists of a 1900 Olympics swimmer, the Australian Freddie Lane, wearing a typical male racing suit of the day. It is one-piece with a tank top, and cut high at the hip to bare almost the entire leg. Other photos, of Duke Kahanamoku from Hawaii, the U.S. champion in 1912, and of the four-man Australasian freestyle swim team at the Stockholm Olympics, all show versions of the same suit. Two or three of these suits, though dark in tone, look surprisingly sheer, to the point where nipples and other details of the body show through. It is scarcely surprising, then, that underneath their suits and quite visible, the swimmers wore a bikini-like bottom, known as an “athletes’.”<sup>28</sup> Certainly more startling for 1912, though, is a photograph of American Olympic swimmers stripped down for action, wearing this scanty garment only. The modest, covering suit worn for competition is nowhere in sight. The fabric out of which the suits were made remains a mystery. They stretch to fit and define the body, so clearly are some kind of knit, but it is hard to state with any certainty what the fiber



Duke Kahanamoku, U.S. Olympic champion, 1912, in his silky suit that reveals bikini-like undershorts. Courtesy of United States Olympic Committee.



U.S. swimmer at the 1912 Olympics wearing an "athletes'" without the covering suit. Courtesy of United States Olympic Committee.

actually was. My own guess for the sheerer ones would be a silk knit, and for the others cotton, or possibly wool. Silk swimming suits for racing existed later, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and were worn in competition then, but I have never been able to find proof that silk, let alone silk knit, was used for swimming as early as the 1910s. Certainly, cotton knit was used in England and elsewhere for men's swimsuits as early as the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Careful study of these 1912 photographs, however, suggests a finer, sheerer, and silkier fabric than cotton. Duke Kahanamoku's suit fits him perfectly, etching every muscle and detail of his body, highlighting it with a kind of sheen, and clearly revealing the bikini-style brief underneath. The fabric looks very different from the opaque suit worn by at least one of the Australasian swimmers, or the semi-opaque suit worn by one of his teammates.

The two Australian women posed for the photographer in female versions of the same style, but very likely theirs were made from cotton or wool knit, to judge by the drape and opacity. Each found a different solution to the modesty problem. Mina Wylie's suit has longer legs, fitting tightly to within a few inches above her knees. Hers also had an extra layer in the form of a bikini brief underneath the lightweight, almost certainly cotton outer suit, as did Duke Kahanamoku's. Fanny Durack, by contrast, wears her extra layer on top, as a hip-length tunic over shorter pants, both clearly wool. Fanny was the outstanding female swimmer of that Olympics, and interestingly, it was her swimsuit that became the standard well into the 1930s, in no small part, one imagines, because it was considerably more becoming than Mina's.<sup>30</sup> It is the swimsuit my own mother wore over a decade later in 1925 at the beach.

The English women's 100-meter relay team offers interesting early versions of the racing suit as well. In a 1912 photograph each of the four members wears a slightly different style, from the almost opaque to the startlingly sheer. All four appear to be wearing the bikini-style briefs underneath, which are more clearly visible on some than on others, as are other details, such as the breasts. The fabric in all four suits seems to be a cotton knit. But here we see a new addition: unlike the Australians (who were unsure that they would be allowed to go to Stockholm until the very last minute), the English swimmers display Union Jacks emblazoned on their swimsuit chests, announcing their nationality to the world; now, of

course, this is a commonplace. The photograph also reveals each of the four looking supremely uncomfortable having her picture taken. Each stands soberly with arms firmly clasped across her chest, three of the four unwilling to meet the camera's eye, even though they had just won first place. So all those years of decorous modesty had apparently taken their toll, even among these pioneers of women's competition.

Back in the United States, the battle to allow women to compete was still going strong. James E. Sullivan, now the president of the AAU, maintained his iron control over amateur athletics in the United States. In 1913 he wrote a letter to the American Life Saving Society, which was planning schoolboy races in conjunction with women's swimming events. The letter, reprinted in the *New York Times*, reads, "Of course you know that the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States does not permit women or girls to be registered in any of its associations, and does not sanction open races for women in connection with Amateur Athletic Union events." Ida Schnall, the captain of the New York Female Giants baseball club, who had publicly expressed women's interest in the diving events at the Stockholm Olympics the year before, also used the *Times* to snap back: "[Sullivan] is always objecting, and never doing anything to help the cause along for a girls' AAU. He objects to a mild game of ball or any kind of athletics for girls. He objects to girls wearing a comfortable bathing suit. He objects to so many things that it gives me cause to think he must be very narrow minded and that we are in the last century."<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, even in the face of rising opposition, Sullivan sent out a resolution to all AAU committee members to be voted on in January 1914. The wording almost guaranteed the results he was looking for: "Resolved: That the AAU does not and will not recognize the registration of women athletes and it is the sense of this committee that the rules were designatedly formed to include none but the male sex."<sup>52</sup> Only one committee member voted against it. So, women stayed out.

This was, however, a significant year for American female athletes, especially swimmers. Two things happened. First, that summer the Rye Beach Swimming Club in Westchester County, New York, helped the women determine to compete by holding a fifty-yard exhibition swimming race for women, thereby attracting attention to their cause. It was no small matter, because in doing so the club defied the AAU's stringent laws and jeopardized its membership in the New York Metropolitan Association of the AAU.

But the second event, and one that sped the process most significantly, was the death of James E. Sullivan in September 1914.<sup>33</sup> It is no coincidence that in November, the AAU governors voted to let women register for swimming. Committee members acknowledged that women would have been admitted much earlier had it not been for Sullivan, but none of them had dared to oppose him.

In speaking for the motion, a couple of members obliquely referred to the issue of dress, appearance, and modesty. Seward A. Simons of the Southern Pacific Association (California), in proposing the special legislation to allow women to compete, said, "I have never seen in any contest any act of immodesty that would bring the blush of shame to any man, mother, or child." Everett Brown of the Central Association also spoke in favor of the amendment, noting that "with the exception of France and the United States every member of the seventeen countries [of the International Amateur Athletic Federation] voted for the competition of women." Furthermore, "there was never a hint . . . of any immodesty or immorality and . . . absolutely [there was] the highest regard for women. I personally saw competitions at Stockholm and if there was any criticism there, it might have been brought about by foul minds."<sup>34</sup> The revealing character of the swimming costume, however, remained a stumbling block.

An incident that occurred the following year, 1915, tells the story best. A news item about a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl wearing a one-piece bathing suit drew the attention of a former AAU Board of Governors member. His indignation propelled him to criticize the "objectional features" of women's swimming generally and the teenager's "shocking" immodesty in particular. In reaction, he brought forward a motion to cancel women's competition altogether. But at the eleventh hour it was rejected, and women's involvement in amateur events was secured.<sup>35</sup>

No Olympics were held in 1916 because of World War I, but in 1917 the Women's Swimming Association of New York (WSANY) was founded and began training swimmers for competition. They experimented with lighter-weight clothing, trying to avoid the heavy wool suits that were reputed to gain an estimated forty pounds in the swimming of just one lap. That same year Ethelda Bleibtrey, the future Olympian, was arrested for "nude swimming" on New York's Manhattan Beach because she had taken off her shoes and stockings to swim bare-legged.<sup>36</sup> The publicity, her stub-

bornness, and the precedent set by the women swimmers in previous Olympics finally paid off, leading to the sanctioning of bare-legged swimming in the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp.

The Americans adopted swimsuits similar to those worn earlier by the Australians, as in the photograph of the prepubescent fourteen-year-old Aileen Riggan, who won the gold for springboard diving. In 1996 Riggan (later Soule), ninety years old and still swimming and writing, visited the U.S. Swimming Olympic trials. “I wrote down a list of 50 things that swimmers have today that we didn’t,” she noted, “everything from starting blocks to weights to suits. You should have seen our suits, with their little ruffled skirts. And they were made of *wool*. Imagine what wet wool feels like against your skin.”<sup>37</sup> To judge by the photo of her in the official Report of the American Olympic Committee from the 1920 Antwerp Games, her memory served her well as to the wool suit, with its tight-fitting, hip-length tunic tank top covering the pants underneath, but it did not have the “little ruffled skirt” she remembered in 1996. Photos in the same report show “Four American Mermaids”<sup>38</sup> wearing suits identical to the American men’s suits, in two different styles, one with a higher-cut neckline. Both styles are tank suits. All four look wet in the photos, and once again, it is difficult to identify the fabric, other than some sort of knit. Riggan’s suit was definitely wool, and looks it in her photo; from the drape and wet shine on the bodies, the four “mermaids” seem to be wearing cotton suits. It is tempting to conclude, although no sources specify, that the divers’ suits were wool but the racers’ suits were cotton, since the latter would soak up less water to weigh the swimmer down. Suits for action swimming that year echoed the Olympic style, whether worn by other competitive swimmers or shown as advertisements in the popular press. Bathing dresses, however, were still the fashion-oriented “heavy, skirty kind” with the ruffled skirts, as Soule described, and would continue to be for another half decade.<sup>39</sup>

American women had won their battle—not the war, perhaps, but definitely the battle. With Sullivan dead, they finally could participate, and wear clothing designed to help them, not hold them back. As *The New York Times* reported in 1914, Sullivan had “opposed . . . women taking part in any event in which they could not wear long skirts.”<sup>40</sup> But now, fully prepared and dressed to win, the American women swept the Olympic swim events in the 1920 Antwerp Games, with Ethelda Bleibtrey, bare-legged of



Australian swimmers Fanny Durack and Wilhemina Wylie. Note Durack's tunic top baring her shoulders, almost certainly of wool; Wylie's cotton suit has a hint of sleeves and reveals her "bikini" underneath. Courtesy of United States Olympic Committee.

Fourteen-year-old diver Aileen Riggan (left), and an Olympic rival beside her; both wear the knit wool tunic-top suit that was to become the classic 1920s swimsuit. Courtesy of United States Olympic Committee.





## WOMEN ENTER THE OLYMPICS



Stewart & Company advertisement, *New York Times*, July 4, 1920, showing “the heavy, skirty kind” of bathing dress, complete with all its accessories. In this ad, it is now referred to as a “bathing suit.”

course, emerging a triple gold winner, the first American woman actually to receive a gold medal.<sup>41</sup>

Along with 2,543 men, 64 women were entered in the 1920 Games.<sup>42</sup> The *New York Times*, though it lauded Bleibtrey, never ran a single photo of her, certainly not in her bathing suit. It would seem that, even as late as 1920, “all the news that’s fit to print” could not accommodate a photograph of an Olympic swimming medalist in what society still considered an immodest swimsuit. Even the language of the *Times* reveals the attitudes of the day:

Dateline Antwerp, Aug. 29 (Associated Press)

The American swimming team won the final of the 800-meter swimming relay here today, creating a new Olympic record of 10 minutes 4 2.5 seconds. The team was composed of [four men].

The final heat of the 400-meter relay swimming race for women was won by the American team. The American mermaids hung up a new Olympic record for the event, 5 minutes 11 4.5 seconds.<sup>45</sup>

The influence of the Women's Swimming Association of New York must not be undervalued. Almost all the swimmers who won in 1920 at Antwerp and 1924 in Paris were trained there, and most had joined in the first place to learn how to swim.<sup>44</sup> Mary Leigh, whose work has so informed most writers on women in the early Olympics, credits the Americans' "sensational new strides" during and after World War I to the "revolutionary" new "American crawl" as taught at the WSANY.<sup>45</sup> Harry Gordon, who fully understood the societal restraints under which the Australian women struggled, gave credit to the Australian crawl, overlooking the functional suits the swimmers wore. Clearly, it was the stroke that defeated the English swimmers in Stockholm in 1908, since all the women seem to have worn variations on the same suit. There is no doubt that the stroke, whether American or Australian, was a major factor in the emergence of women's competitive swimming, but its application must be paired with the new, sleeker suits to explain the emergence of women as swimming stars. Yet of all the sources on the history of women in the Olympics or in sports, only two, Paula Welch and Harold Lerch's *History of American Physical Education* as well as Gordon, specifically mention clothing or link the issue of clothing with women's participation in any way. Welch and Lerch attributed the long skirts to Sullivan's resistance, and Gordon, as we have seen, links the clothing to the mores of the time. But no one has drawn a specific causal relationship between the Americans' winning in 1920 and the dress they wore to do it.

To a historian of dress, it seems obvious that engagement in sports, certainly for American women, depended almost completely on clothing, first as a physical factor that hampered movement, and second as a societal factor that, for very different reasons, hampered participation. Although most

universally, sports historians ignore the significance of clothing as a factor in the development of women's involvement in any athletic endeavor, without appropriately functional clothing, successful participation in the early days, as we have seen, was impossible. No amount of training in the crawl, whether Australian or American, would have helped a swimmer excel if she'd had to wear a suit that soaked up water, dragged against her progress, or pulled her under.

As an afterword to this story, it is interesting to note what has happened since 1920. From this account, it would seem that American women surmounted the barrier once and for all in those 1920 Olympic Games. Society's disapproval of women in sports, however, has been a long time dying. Just a few years later, in 1926, a German, Walter Kuhn, wrote about the ugliness of women straining and sweating for athletics: "And could such a woman see herself in the mirror, I believe she would consider very carefully whether or not she would continue such activities, because one cannot but agree that participation in contests results in a loss of femininity and therewith the finest that one esteems her." Thus, he concluded, it was a mistake to bring equality of the sexes into sports.<sup>46</sup>

The numbers seem to reflect this attitude. Even later in the century, men outnumbered women in the Olympics 4 to 1 until the late 1980s, when the ratio dropped to 3 to 1. In 1996, out of the 10,800 athletes who competed that summer, an estimated 3,800 were women, still maintaining approximately a 3-to-1 ratio.<sup>47</sup> In the Summer Games in Sydney in 2000, the numbers improved but did not reach 40 percent. And the press still reports on women's clothing and appearance. As Florence Griffith Joyner competed in every Olympiad from 1984 in Los Angeles to Atlanta in 1996, her clothing, her appearance, even her fingernails were fodder for comment. Although a few journalists mentioned the very brief, sleek swimsuits, reminiscent of those 1912 under-bikinis, that men such as Mark Spitz or Greg Louganis wore when they won their golds, their appearance failed to raise little more than eyebrows. By contrast, in April 1996 the women's track and field team at Florida State University won a meet but were disqualified because their uniform, with "bun hugger" bottoms, was judged unacceptable—too brief, too revealing.<sup>48</sup> And in Amherst, Massachusetts,

perhaps one of the most liberal towns in the entire country, in the spring of 1996 two high-school-aged sisters received much local press, some of it startlingly negative, when they refused to play on the Amherst Regional High School lacrosse team because they were forced to wear kilts (a final remnant of Victorianism) instead of the more functional and gender-neutral shorts. Taking us full circle in regards to the initial issue of appearance, officials for the 1998 Winter Olympics complained that mixed-doubles luge was in jeopardy as a sport because no women were entered in it. They were discouraged “because two people lying on a sled don’t look nice.” As recently as the 2002 Salt Lake Games, the excuse for prohibiting women from competing in the ski jump was the same one that has been used for the past 150 years: that women’s “delicate physiology” would be too shaken by the jarring of the landings (never mind that girls who live in the mountains have been ski jumping probably for as long as their brothers).<sup>49</sup> Given such stereotypes and criticism, women must still struggle to find roles—clothing—acceptable to themselves and to the people who set the rules.

In short, Coubertin’s spirit remains alive and well. It is interesting to speculate whether the Games, now so keenly anticipated, would ever have come into existence without his obsession. But he resisted women’s participation in athletics until his dying day. In 1934 he declared that “women will always be imperfect copies. There is nothing to learn from watching them; so those who assemble for this purpose have other things in mind.”<sup>50</sup>

In this brief look at women’s early participation in the Olympics, I have attempted to show some of the steps through which women finally achieved their goals of participation and success. Of course, this struggle did not take place in a vacuum, even in regard to clothing. The emergence of women’s clothing for sports activities paralleled the loosening of boundaries that enclosed women’s lives in the first decades of the twentieth century. Dress for women was changing significantly on all fronts, loosening cut, drape, fit, and underwear. But the Olympics, whose history has been well examined by many writers, have always provided a springboard for new ideas and designs for sleekness, speed, and success in a highly competitive world. Men have had an advantage from the start in being able to wear pared-down shorts and tank tops, body-hugging swimsuits, and lean, skin-baring outfits for individual events, all without social stigma. Women have

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had to work to gain their own lean, pared-down outfits that permit them to compete and to succeed. Interestingly, with the advanced stretch textiles available today, athletes are beginning to cover up again. Better yet, men and women are wearing much the same clothing to do the same jobs. The second skins they wear to compete once again shave valuable fractions of seconds off their time.