

STRUGGLE FOR OPPORTUNITY: WOMEN'S SPORT 1863-1969

When the founders of modern football met in that London pub in 1863, the game they formalized was intended to be played by boys and men - not girls and women whose supposed physical and moral frailty could not handle the rigors of football. This perception of females as “delicate” served as an overwhelming challenge for women’s opportunities in the early years of modern football - and sport more widely. Backed by [the Victorian era’s scientifically-supported “vitalist principle”](#) which explained aging and death by positing the hypothesis each human was born with a finite amount of “vital energy” to be distributed “appropriately” over a lifetime, members of the “weaker sex” were pushed to the sidelines of sport for their “own good”. “Confirmed” by the [infirmary of the female body](#) through menstruation and menopause, as well as their primary responsibility to expend “vital energies” keeping the home and child rearing, women engaging in unnecessary physical exertions were seen as [“rough girls”](#). Middle and upper class “gentlemen”, however, were expected to play organized sport to cultivate both physical strength and virtuous character. As such, elite boarding schools and colleges integrated sport into the curriculum to turn the future leaders of the British Empire into [“Muscular Christians”](#).

This attitude toward “appropriate” engagement in strenuous physical activity led to the elevation of the [amateur ideal](#) whereby *how* one played reigned over an emphasis on sporting *outcomes* (the contrasting professional ideal). Only “gentlemen” could balance the physical and ethical challenges of elite sport with the moral fortitude necessary to exemplify the amateur ideal. Embodying this “exceptionalist” view of sport, the founder of the Modern Olympics, French aristocrat Pierre de Coubertin, revived the Games to both inspire the French youth and to leverage the physical and moral good of sport to inspire a better world. [De Coubertin also reinforced the vision](#) of women as medically and morally incapable of participating in strenuous sport:

“The role of a woman in the world remains as it always has been. She is above all a companion to man, the future mother of the family and should be brought up having such fate in mind. . . . It is indecent that spectators should be exposed to the risk of seeing the body of a woman being smashed before their eyes. Besides, no matter how toughened a sportswoman may be, her organism is not cut out to sustain certain shocks. Her nerves rule her muscles, nature wanted it that way.”

Despite this systematic and scientific resistance to women in sport, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) did permit female competitions [beginning in 1900](#): sailing, tennis, croquet, and golf - emerging activities of the country club elite able to be performed in a “ladylike” fashion, reducing the “horrors” of watching women sweat and strain. These activities did reflect a slow transformation in western society, however, as women in the west increasingly engaged in

leisurely physical activities including riding bicycles, swimming (in stockings and robes), and archery. By 1921 a “socially connected” French rower, [Alice Milliat, created the Women’s World Games](#) in Monte Carlo when denied entrance into the Olympics. The success of the initial event, repeated in 1922 and 1923, pressured the IOC to reluctantly incorporate a wider range of women’s sport in the Olympics (including track and field) to wrestle control away from Milliat’s creation.

In [1928, track and field at the Amsterdam Olympics](#) included women’s events for the first time. Notable performances, particularly [Canada’s Matchless Six](#), drew worldwide attention – especially [Ethel Catherwood](#) who would be nicknamed the “Saskatoon Lily” by the international media for her appealing appearance. In the 800m event, however, [all the racers collapsed at the end of the race](#), providing “evidence” that women were incapable of such strenuous physical exertions. As a result, women were restricted to nothing longer than 200m (half a track) until the 1960 Games, with the first [Olympic marathon not held until 1984](#). But women were now, at least, a visible presence in international sports with opportunities mirroring larger societal shifts exemplified by the [suffrage movement](#) and expanded socioeconomic gender roles [during both world wars](#). Furthermore, American athletes such as [multi-sport star Babe Didrikson](#) and English Channel record-breaking [swimmer Gertrude Ederle](#), as well as the members of the [All-American Girls Pro Baseball League](#) (1943-1954) broke barriers and generated genuine interest in the athletic feats of women.

Women’s association football similarly experienced the “one step forward, one step back” reality of the first century of women’s modern sport. As David Goldblatt writes in his epic historical account of football, [The Ball is Round](#) in the face of institutionalized restrictions, reports of women playing across Britain began in 1888 – including a formal match organized by the Scottish FA in 1892 and a first English contest in 1895. To quash any expansion, however, the Dutch FA and German FA prohibited women from playing on official football grounds, with the English FA banning matches between males and females in 1902. Although unable to play mixed gender football, English women’s football continued to grow, with Dick Kerr’s Ladies – a team affiliated with his Preston factory – drew large crowds during charity matches, including 53,000 for a 1920 match in Liverpool against St. Helens Ladies. With up to 150 teams in existence by 1921, a Ladies’ Football Association was formed (pp. 180-181).

As women’s football in Britain, as well as France and Belgium, surged exponentially, the English FA adopted a similar [ban to play on sanctioned football grounds in 1921](#) as the Netherlands and Germany. The FA’s decision was based on the idea that “the game of football is [quite unsuitable for females](#) and ought not to be encouraged”. This effectively halted the progress of women’s football in Britain and Europe, with limited access to FA grounds, coaching, or finances.