



MALMÖ HÖGSKOLA

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The history of women's sports, when it's finally written, will surely be an awe-inspiring document. Think of all these brave and committed women, who against all odds created a room of their own, a zenana, in the ever predominantly male world of sports – 3,000 years ago and through to this day. A few of these women appear in *'A Proper Spectacle': Women Olympians 1900–1936*, a tribute to female olympians who were active between the Paris Games at the turn of the century and the infamous Berlin Games 1936. The book is built around a material of interviews with and photos of the participants of the ten Summer Games held between 1900 and 1936 that were still alive around the turn of the century 2000, and is researched and written by Stephanie Daniels and Anita Tedder. Profusely illustrated with original photopgraphs, the book has been reviewed for [idrottsforum.org](http://idrottsforum.org) by sports historian Åsa Änghede. She would have appreciated an outright scientific and analytic approach to the question of women and sports, but she appreciates what's on offer, a unique source material to the history of women's sports.

## A story of women Olympians

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*Stephanie Daniels & Anita Tedder***'A Proper Spectacle': Women Olympians 1900–1936**

Foreword by Paula Radcliffe

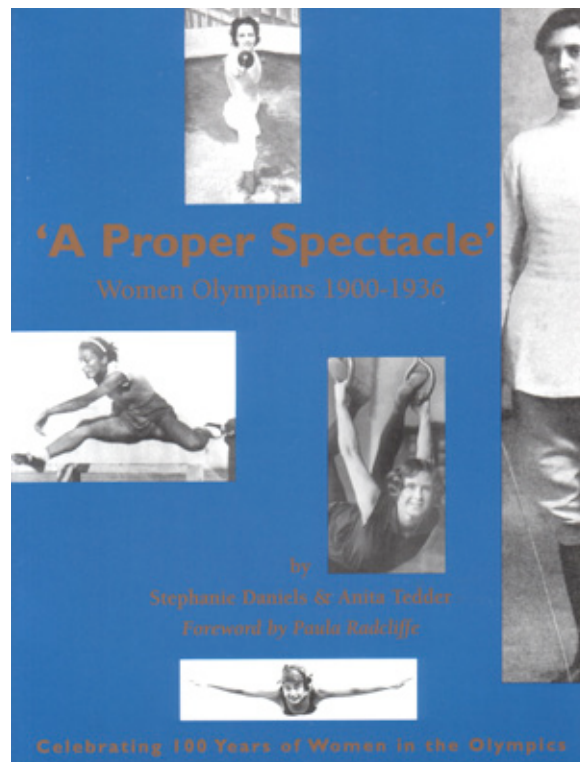
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This book deals with women Olympians between 1900 and 1936 and is written as a tribute to celebrate one hundred years of women's participation in the Olympic Games. It consists of nine chapters in which the writers focus on all the Olympic Games between 1900 and 1936. It features summaries of stories and memories of women competitors from the Olympics at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The authors have been in contact with the Olympic Associations of countries whose women participated in the Olympic Games before the Second World War and asked if they could help locating their oldest women Olympians. The majority of the participating countries were European. Africa and Asia, with the exception of Japan and Australia, did not participate in the games prior to the war. Greece, Argentina, Australia, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Sweden and USA assisted in the search. The authors also received help from colleagues in the International Society of Olympic Historians and staff at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. A questionnaire was subsequently sent out to the women and this was followed up with telephone conversations and more letters. Women's Olympic sporting



history has not been very well documented and first hand accounts are quite rare. The book's first priority was to focus on the personal experiences of these women, making this a publication that does not provide statistics, but instead contains historical facts, stories and memories about sports, sportswomen and the Summer Olympic Games. A number of the women featured in the book never won a medal, but they symbolise the struggle by women to participate in sport.

The book begins by providing an historical flashback to the ancient Greek Olympics, where women were forbidden to compete or even watch the games. This attitude, however, changed as the years passed and women came up with a number of cunning ways to get past these rules. The first games for women (held to honour Hera) took place 1000 BC and were held every four years, as were the men's games. The games came to a close at the end of the 4th century AD, and it was not until the end of the 1800's that attempts were made to restart them. The Englishman, Dr. William Penny-Brookes organised the Much Wenlock Festival in Shropshire in 1850, where a mixture of athletics and country sports developed into the Shropshire Olympic Games by 1861. In contrast to the Ancient Greeks, Penny-Brookes not only offered women the best seats at the festivals but also encouraged them to participate, despite the first prize for the only race they had was one pound of tea.

While Penny-Brookes was in a position to approach Greece in 1881 to fulfil his international vision to set up a modern version of the Olympic Games, there was also a Frenchman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who was also hoping to revive the Games. The two men became friends, but they had different ambitions. Coubertin wanted the games to be "based on conditions suited to the needs of modern life", while Penny-Brookes's focus was on "country sports". Coubertin was, however, the more conservative of the two and did not want women participating in sports, activities that could jeopardise their primary function, that of reproduction, and he believed that the woman's place was at home, caring for the family. He would not allow women to become IOC members. His ideal woman was one who gave birth to male athletes and who did not compete as an athlete herself.

Tomorrow, there will probably be women runners, or even women football players? If such sports are played by women, would they constitute a proper spectacle to offer the audience that an Olympiad brings together? We do not think this may be claimed to be so.

This statement by Pierre de Coubertin in July 1912 clearly shows that he was not over the moon about women participating in competitive sports. Coubertin's personal opinion was a decisive factor when it came to women being allowed to compete in sports, which goes to show how strong his influence was. The reasoning behind this could have received more attention from the authors, since it would have been exciting to read a theoretical discussion on the significance of the roles played by those involved versus the sport structures of the time. On the whole, a more theoretical focus and deeper analysis in the book would have been of interest, as it would also have led to safer and more far-reaching conclusions.

In the Paris Olympics Games in 1900, women were allowed for the first time to officially compete, with Helen de Pourtales being the first to participate in yachting. A prize podium was used for the first time in Los Angeles Olympics in 1932, making it an important event and one that always remains with those who were there. It was also at these games that the first Black American woman took part. The absence of black women prior to the Los Angeles event was most likely a function of racism, and it would have been interesting if the book had discussed this issue in relation to women's sports.

Progress was being made even at a slow pace, yet there are issues that still need to be highlighted. In 1996, 3,620 women participated in the games, which was 40% of the total number of participants, but 26 countries did not send any women at all that year. Compared that to 1932, when 127 women took part, making their experiences rather unique. According to the authors, the most exciting development in the eighties and nineties for the Olympic Games is the participation of women from Africa and Muslim countries.

The book does not offer a scientific viewpoint but is rather a descriptive narration of the women's stories and personal experiences. My personal belief is that the book would have benefited greatly by offering a more detailed analysis of why things happened and also of the various developments that took place societal level between games. It would have been interesting if the research had been extended to include the modern games, as I suspect that many changes have occurred regarding women's relationship to the Olympic Games in the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for instance the role played by women as ideals of beauty. The book is, on the other hand, very well written and full of details which can bring back memories to the older generation, besides being an interesting and in many ways important historical source.

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