Considerations on women’s sport

The Brazilian Mara Fuhrman (16 years of age), one of the 17 women who took part for the first time in 1976 in the famous New Year race.
At the beginning of time man used his muscular strength to find his food and to survive. That is why in primitive society physical capacities were predominant and were an asset of major importance. The physically gifted were the best. Muscular exercise was therefore vital; the successful had to have a perfect physical and aesthetic condition. Later Greek society deified the best individuals and erected altars to them in tribute. The Olympic Games and sports competitions came into being around this period. Combining the activities of the mind and the body the philosophers created this immortal Greek civilisation which has become the keystone of present-day western culture.

The chronicles of ancient Greece recount, for example, that Milon of Kroton (580-500 BC), the famous Hellenic athlete, was a friend and follower of Pythagoras. He also made a name for himself in philosophy as several centuries later his work in this field was still discussed. This great athlete and scholar was also a great warrior judging from the victory he won for his town. He united strength, mind and valour which are components of the perfect harmony of sport. At this time women were excluded from this kind of event and their role was limited to reproducing strong and healthy individuals. Generally they were not allowed to attend sports competitions.

Later it was said that physical exercise, considered too violent, was harmful to femininity and impeded the ability to reproduce. Only dancing, as an aesthetic activity, was permitted. Gradually ideas evolved; today men and women are considered “equal but different”. I believe we are reaching the objective for, if from the racial point of view “different” does not mean “equal”, in sport the difference in sex, in spite of everything that has been said, implies physiological and anatomical differences which do not generally allow men and women to participate in the same competitions under equal conditions and with equal chances. It is necessary to establish this distinction as it can act as a means of protection.

With regard to preparation and training men and women must of necessity be placed on the same footing. One of the reasons for the success of the German Democratic Republic’s women athletes is the fact that right from the start their training programme is identical to that of the men’s teams. For training according to two different programmes creates an imbalance which can be seen in the results. Today the strict training laid down for athletes can be followed by women to the same degree of intensity and quality. Intensive training as a source of bodily changes according to the aesthetic concept is an idea which is no longer valid. The excuses of a few years ago, such as “I wouldn’t like to have muscles like that, they are not women any more” are no longer put forward. Competition athletes follow intensive training to achieve a specific aim; once the competitions are over they marry and become excellent mothers from the gynaecological and obstetric point of view; moreover they acquire a philosophy of life that only sport can provide.

Nowadays it is clear that biological factors count more than anything. Society has changed and there is no longer fear that an athlete might lose her femininity through the practice of exercises considered violent or exhausting. Only a few years ago women were not allowed to take part in certain events such as the marathon or the long distance cycling race. The number of women’s competitions in these sports is today increasing. From the medical point of view everyone is now agreed that a gynaecologically healthy woman loses none of her femininity in the practice of sport.

Studies and research on the harmful effects of women’s competition sport are quite recent and serious studies based on valid statistics have scarcely begun to see the light of day. In 1963 Astrano undertook research in Sweden on female swimmers
subjected to intensive training. The conclusions of his work on development and long-term repercussions in the obstetric and gynaecological field produced perfectly normal clinical reports. The Amateur Athletic Union of the United States has also published a study on women's competition sport, specifying that no harmful effect has been discovered. In Hungary Ervely carried out research on 729 Hungarian women athletes. He states that he did not find any long-term deterioration in obstetric and gynaecological behaviour. The average length of labour during childbirth was less than the average of the control group and a study showed a 50% decrease in Caesarians compared to the control group.

Specialists have already shown us the favourable effects of physical exercise, in particular on pre- and postnatal lumbar pains as well as certain dysmenorrhoeas. However there is still some doubt concerning the menstrual cycle—what are the effects of the menses on competitions, and do they have a direct influence on sports results? Current knowledge on hormone function and the menstrual cycle enables us to evaluate correctly the interpretations of this completely natural phenomenon in women.

In former times legends, customs and superstitions considered this normal physiological function as a divine punishment, or as a cosmic influence connected with the lunar cycle, or again as the excretion of toxic substances demanding women's total isolation since they were considered impure throughout the whole of this period when they could even contaminate food, but all
these accepted ideas and a number of others have today more or less completely disappeared. However, although ignorance in this respect seems quite inconceivable, there are still a large number of regions in the world today where women continue to suffer from these ancestral prejudices. Even today some young athletes bear the cost of these accepted ideas and lose their physical form through fear or lack of education. In medical terms there is no proof that sport is harmful to women. On the contrary, research shows that those who participate in sport suffer less from dysmenorrhoeas and have easier childbirths with fewer complications than women leading sedentary lives.

The influence of menstruation on high level sports competitions is much debated. I have been a gynaecologist for over thirty years, have taken part as an athlete in competitions, and at present I am in contact with international and Olympic class athletes. The research we have undertaken leads us to the following conclusion: an athlete in full possession of her psychical and physiological balance, experiencing no hormonal or gynaecological complication, will achieve absolutely normal results or performances even during menstruation. As part of our research we made a discreet study of athletes taking part in high level international competitions. Almost all of them were in agreement that neither intensive training nor competition was adversely affected by menstruation.

However certain replies call for a few remarks as the deterioration reported to us was not so much of a physical as a psychical nature. One of our athletes broke a national and Central American record during her menstrual period. When we tried to find out what could have influenced her to achieve this result she informed us that her period came the day before the competition and she thus considered herself in a position of inferiority on account of this monthly flow of blood. The only way for her to fight this disorder was to force the pace right from the start, but she was still keeping up this maximum effort at the end of the race and it was this which carried her to victory. It is strange to note that the negative replies we received came from sports where concentration plays a more important role than physical effort as such. In golf the competitors did not feel weakened from the point of view of fatigue or endurance, and the distance covered by the ball was the same, but for putting where concentration is intense they did not feel at ease, something worried them which of course they put down to their menstrual periods. Archery competitors gave us similar answers.

We do not have a sufficient number of cases to be able to carry out a determinant study based on appropriate statistical data, but the impressions of a person belonging to both the worlds of high level sport and obstetrics and gynaecology specialists are surely not devoid of all value. From the psychological point of view it can in actual fact be considered that menstruation does have a major influence in competitions for high level athletes. The psychological influence may be indirect as in the case of the swimmers who felt ill at ease because other people, in particular the male sex, could realise that they had their menstrual period.

We have a few more observations to make, particularly as far as swimming is concerned. Although it is a sport which is practised in water it does not impose any special restrictions. Immersion in cold or warm water does not cause any disorder. Formerly it was thought that the menstrual flow was the body’s expulsion of harmful substances. Let us repeat that menstruation is a natural physiological function. As long as the necessary precautions are taken there is no risk of the swimming pool becoming contaminated. We only need to think of the number of bacteria which the body expels in a public place, from which it follows that the pathological potential of the vagina is insignificant in comparison with other human excretions expelled by the mouth, the nose or the anus. Water does not enter the vagina and there is consequently no reason for preventing swimmers from taking part in competitions or training during their menstrual period.

During our research at the Olympic Games we came across a young athlete who had taken part in three swimming competitions the same day. She won two gold medals in the relay and an individual race, moreover improving the Olympic and world record, and all this during her menstruation. Thanks to modern sanitary towels and dark-coloured swimming costumes, competitors can take part in various events in perfect confidence and peace without their ability being reduced.

In certain cases there has been a tendency to modify the hormonal cycle of young athletes by using therapeutic hormone substances from the medicinal arsenal of
modern gynaecology. The use of progestogens may modify the menstrual cycle by delaying menstruation so that it does not occur during the competitions. But what might seem normal from a clinical point of view is totally different in practice, for in most cases the competitor will be in a condition of physical and psychological imbalance. It would be better for the athlete to be well acquainted with her menstrual cycle and for her to know that nothing prevents her quite normal participation in competitions.

But let us come back for a moment to the medical considerations concerning the participation of women in high level sports competitions. Olympic participation demands physical preparation and training over several years which can begin at puberty. As far as women’s sports accepted by the International Olympic Committee are concerned, we must establish from the anatomo-physiological point of view whether there are exercises which in the long run could harm the competitors’ physical aspect.

Experience shows that women following supervised training will not suffer any organic disorder from the intensive practice of these sports. On account of the pelvic cavity’s natural defence mechanisms the risk of the reproductive organs becoming impaired through traumatisms caused by the practice of sport, unless they are strictly speaking accidents, is extremely unlikely, for the uterus and connected organs are perfectly protected inside the pelvis.

Neither age nor the puberty or pre-puberty periods have a great influence. The average age of female competitors in large teams is around fifteen and a half, while the first contact with competition can often take place before the age of five.

In conclusion it can be said that physical education and competition of Olympic standard do not present any danger for women. Quite on the contrary, they have a favourable influence on their psychological and physical development.

E.H.