



ALICE MILLIAT AND THE WOMEN'S GAMES

Alice Milliat, a Frenchwoman from the Nantes region about whom very little detailed biographical information now remains, was nonetheless an important figure in the women's sports movement in the early part of the 20th century.

An article in the *Cahiers de la République des Lettres des Sciences et des Sports* of May 1927 describes her as “the soul of the women's sports movement . . . a living example of modern woman, accustomed to all sports disciplines, highly capable of fulfilling the social role which falls to women in this vibrant 20th century” (1).

Although as a child Alice was not really interested in sport or the gymnastics she learned at school, she was won over by sport when she began to attend sports events.

She became an excellent sports-woman. Her favourite sport was rowing and she even became the first woman to be awarded the *Audax* long distance rowing certificate for covering several dozen kilometres in a skiff within a given time limit.

In the same article in May 1927, Alice Milliat described how sport “develops personalities, gives confidence and courage, generates a resourceful spirit” (1) and how much these qualities had helped her as a leading sports administrator and in her crusade for the development and recognition of women's sport at French national, international and particularly Olympic levels.

Alice Milliat gained her first experience of sports leadership with the Parisian

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club “Femina Sport”, founded in 1912, where she became President in 1915.

Women's athletics events were being held with increasing regularity. The phenomenon was growing and clubs were being formed. In July 1917, “Femina Sport” was therefore able to organize an interclub meeting which was hugely successful in terms of sporting achievement and public enthusiasm.

Also in 1917, with this success behind her, Alice Milliat was able to set up the *Federation des Sociétés Féminines de France* (French Federation of Women's Clubs), of which she became President on 10 March 1919.

Alice Milliat was also a very keen traveller. By visiting many foreign countries she gained a detailed knowledge of sports administration, particularly in the United States of America, England and Scandinavia. At the same time, she built up a reliable network of foreign contacts, also benefiting from the help of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with which she maintained strong relations.

Alice Milliat used all her experience to aid women's sport by organizing the

first Women's Olympiad in Monaco in 1921. Five nations participated: Great Britain, Switzerland, Italy, Norway and France.

That same year, she was behind the creation of a new body, the *Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale* (International Women's Sport Federation-FSFI), founded in Paris on 31 October with the support of England, Italy, the United States of America, Czechoslovakia and France.

The second Women's Olympiad were held in 1922, again in Monaco, with almost 300 competitors. The countries that had participated in 1921 were joined by Belgium and Czechoslovakia. By organizing these international competitions and setting up the *FSFI*, Alice Milliat and her colleagues achieved a dual objective: to overcome Baron Pierre de Coubertin's reluctance to allow women to play a proper part in the Olympic Games and to force the International Amateur Athletics Federation to take women's athletics seriously.

The *FSFI* embarked on organizing the first Women's World Games, held in the Pershing stadium in Paris on 20 April 1922. A large and supportive crowd watched the American, English, Swiss, Czech and French athletes who competed.

The second World Games took place in Gothenburg, Sweden on 20 April 1926. Countries were represented by different numbers of athletes, with some multitasking sportswomen representing their countries virtually single-handedly, e.g. Kiroue Hitomi from Japan and Frenchwoman Georgette Gagneux, a highly talented intellectual



Alice Milliat.

and sportswoman who competed in sprinting, throwing, long jump and relay events. The second World Games were again a success, as Alice Milliat pointed out: *"People are interested in the Women's Olympic Games; during the last Games in Gothenburg, all foreign diplomats spent a night travelling from Stockholm to watch the athletics events. Is that not proof in itself?"* (1). The FSFI was becoming an autonomous and powerful body, a challenge to the Olympic Movement. The international authorities tried to channel the movement for their own benefit. The International Athletics Federation laid claim to control of women's athletics and an agreement was finally signed by the two federations.

The International Olympic Committee was prepared to include women's events in the Olympic Games. Five events thus featured in the Games of the IX Olympiad in Amsterdam in 1928: 100m, 800m, high jump, discus and 4x100m.

Believing the number of women's events to be inadequate and unsure whether they would be retained for the 1932 Olympics, Alice Milliat

decided to continue organizing the World Games.

Two further World Games were therefore held, in Prague in September 1930, with 16 participating nations, and in London in 1934.

Alongside these Games, the FSFI held regular international congresses under Alice Milliat's leadership. Rules were standardized, new records registered and new disciplines introduced at these congresses. Nine such women's sport congresses were held: Paris 1921 - 1922 - 1923, Gothenburg 1926, Amsterdam 1928, Prague 1930, Vienna 1932, London 1934 and Berlin 1936. They provided an opportunity to hold vital discussions on the achievements, regulation and structure of women's sport. They also dealt with important contemporary issues. For example, after cheating was discovered, the FSFI decided at its Berlin congress to introduce medical examinations during major competitions held from 1936 onwards, in order to verify competitors' femininity.

Furthermore, the structure and strategies of the FSFI became a model for several independent women's sports federations and clubs set up to

counter discrimination by existing authorities. This was the case in football, swimming, hockey and rowing.

The fifth World Games were due to be held in Austria or Poland in 1938. However, following pressure from the FSFI, the Olympic Games gradually included more and more women's events. The Games of the XI Olympiad in 1936 featured an almost complete programme of women's athletics.

The FSFI was ultimately the victim of its own success. Its dual objective of genuine women's participation in the Olympic Games on the one hand and within the International Amateur Athletics Federation on the other had been achieved. Women's athletics became the responsibility of the IAAF.

The FSFI closed down in 1938. Alice Milliat's career as an international sports leader was over. Thanks to her character, charisma and actions, she remained a key figure of the women's sports movement of the early 20th century. She also remained a visionary of the realities of sport: *"Unfortunately, we have no leaders; the men involved with men's sport do not realize that they could do themselves a favour by showing some interest in women's sport; they shut themselves away in their everlasting male egoism..."* (1)

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Sources

(1) *Cahiers de la République des Lettres des Sciences et des Sports*, no.6, May 1927, *Les Beaux Arts*.

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