

THE FIRST TWO WOMEN OLYMPIANS

by Bill Mallon

Until very recently, it has always been stated that the first females to compete at the Olympic Games were the tennis players (7) who competed from 6-11 July 1900 at the 1900 Paris Olympics. Later that year, on 3 October, 10 women golfers also competed in the Olympic golf event.

There has also been the suggestion that one woman sailed aboard a yacht in 1900. With the 1900 yachting events having taken place from 22-26 May this would make Helen de Pourtalès (SUI) the first female Olympian. However, her participation cannot be well documented. Ian Buchanan has made extensive studies of the 1900 yachting events and has never found a reference to Mme. de Pourtalès and does not feel that she actually “competed.” In 1900, as with chariot racing at the Ancient Olympics, some of the yachtsmen listed in the reports were actually the wealthy yacht owners who did not actually race or compete, but simply hired sailors to race their yachts for them. Mme. de Pourtalès’ husband, Hermann Alexandre de Pourtalès, apparently skippered the yacht, *Lérina*, for Switzerland, and won the 1-2 ton class at Paris. He was also the owner of that yacht. It is possible that his wife was a co-owner of *Lérina* and would fall into this category but this hardly seems to qualify her as an “Olympian.”

Recently, however, I have found two other women who competed in the 1900 Olympic Games, and preceded the women tennis players. They competed in croquet which began on 28 June, and they competed against the men in the same competition. Thus they would be the first female Olympians. Their names are listed in the Paris daily sporting journal of the time, *Journal des Sports*. They are Mme. Filleaul Brohy (goddaughter of Brohy) and Mlle. Marie Ohnier.

One of the two croquet competitions for singles, simple à une boule (singles with one ball) began on 28 June and was apparently contested as an elimination event with several rounds. After each round, the lowest finishers were eliminated and the leaders advanced.

In round one there were nine (9) croquet players, among them Mme. Brohy and Mlle. Ohnier. Both are listed as not having finished the round, and thus not advancing to the second round. The first round was won by Waydelich with 11 points. Four croquetists advanced to the second round, where Waydelich was eliminated. There were three rounds until Aumoitte was declared the champion by defeating John 15-21 in the final round.

The other singles croquet event in 1900, simple à deux boules (singles with two balls), was held on 4 July 1900. Both Mme. Brohy and Mlle. Ohnier were entered. Mme. Brohy competed, per *Journal des Sports*, but retired and forfeited her first round match with Waydelich who eventually won the championship. Mlle. Ohnier was scheduled to meet Marcel Haentjens (BEL) in a first round match in this event on 11 July. No result was ever published for this match, so it cannot be certain if she competed.

I have never found the names of Brohy or Ohnier in any other source for the Paris Olympics, and I have looked at most of the primary sporting newspapers of the times, as well as all the standard daily Parisien newspapers. This is not unusual, however, as I have never seen the croquet event covered in any detail at all except in *Journal des Sports*. I now consider Mme. Brohy and Mlle. Marie Ohnier to be the first women Olympians.