

**The Pioneering Role Of  
Madame Alice Milliat and the FSFI\*  
in Establishing International Trade  
and Field Competition for Women  
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Sports historians in general have not been very often impressed by the performance of the French people as competitors in world class sports and athletics. On the other hand, practically everyone who is interested in sports from an historical point of view knows that Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who re-introduced the Olympic Games to the modern world, was a Frenchman. For almost thirty years Coubertin molded and shaped the organization and direction of the Olympic movement to his own specifications. Thus, in contrast to the general view of French competitors, their leadership in the development of international sport was of great consequence, particularly during the first part of the twentieth century.

The disregard of sports historians for the accomplishments of the French is even more pronounced when it comes to women's sports. Most, if not all of them, have failed to recognize the pioneering role of the French in establishing world-wide competitions for women, particularly in track and field. In the person of Madame Alice Milliat, France claimed the most dynamic and respected leader of the women's sports movement of the 1920's and 1930's. It was through the unflinching efforts of that determined woman and her associates that Olympic officials were forced to recognize the desire of women to compete in international sports and to represent their countries as men did in Olympic competitions. It is the purpose of this paper to publicize the pioneering achievements of Alice Milliat and the organization of which she was president, and to propose that sports historians grant proper recognition and importance to those achievements as they concern women.

\*FSFI as it appears in this paper means Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale. The translation into English is International Federation of Women's Sports.

It is generally accepted that women's interest in sports and athletics in the early 1900's and the subsequent organization of sports clubs for women came as a result of radical changes regarding their status and role in society. No one can state with certainty what was the foremost reason for the awakening of women to sport. It is certain that the opportunities for women to become educated were more numerous and a few enlightened writers had begun to recognize the "new woman" of the twentieth century as the intellectual equal of man. But educated women tended to continue to abide by the restrictive dictates of society as far as sport achievement was concerned. It was mainly the working women, those who dared to work either from desire or from necessity, who were also the first ones to have the audacity to assert their independence in other ways. They participated in activities such as bicycling, foot-racing, wrestling, boxing, in short, all kinds of "outrageous behaviors" that were shocking to the sensibilities of the day's traditionalists. Perhaps the feminist movement which had begun more than a half-century before had finally penetrated the hearts and minds of women so that they actually believed they could do anything men could do. Or perhaps World War I provided the seeds for social change; crisis required women to believe in and rely upon their own self-sufficiency. In any case, many women were willing to face public disapproval and even ridicule in order to assert themselves in the sports arena.

Despite the strongly apparent desires of women for equality with men, even the best educated and best informed men of the period were opposed to those yearnings. Baron de Coubertin, himself a well-educated, well-informed man, was aware of the feminist movement and its goals even before the turn of the century. He remained fiercely opposed to women's participation in competitive sports for as long as he lived. He has been quoted as saying that the French, by heredity, by disposition, and by taste were opposed to the apparent equality of the two sexes. The French would accept equality, he said, as long as it was not openly displayed and did not change deep-rooted traditions.<sup>1</sup>

This was obviously a strong personal belief because women's open expression or display of equality through the sports medium was criticized and ridiculed by Coubertin at every opportunity. For instance, in 1908 he was thoroughly em-

<sup>1</sup>Marie-Therese Eyquem, *Pierre de Coubertin: Epopée Olympique* (Paris: 1966), pp. 171-172.

barrassed and offended by the so-called indecency of English women coming down hills on snow sleds in rather ungraceful positions, and he loudly said so. The sight was painfully ugly to him.<sup>2</sup> He was shocked at seeing women engaged in strenuous exercises, sweating in their effort. Pierre de Coubertin approved of women's exercises, but only for reasons of health and only in very private surroundings.

Pierre de Coubertin's attitude did not change as the years passed nor did it differ significantly from that of the general public. This disapproving attitude was transformed into hostility as potential sportswomen petitioned for acceptance into male sporting establishments as full-fledged members. Marie-Thérèse Eyquem, a noted French sports historian who won a literary award for her biography of Pierre de Coubertin, has said that the most pronounced hostility shown sportswomen came from members of the male sports establishments. Women in France were refused entry into or support by the male federations of sports such as track and field, swimming, basketball, soccer, and cycling.<sup>3</sup> The direct result of the refusal of male establishments to concern themselves with the needs of women in the area of sport was the development of women's sports clubs.

In France, the first such women's sports club was established by Pierre Payssé in 1911. The club, known as Fémina-Sport (still in existence today) combined dance and sport. Its members were required to take courses given by the disciples of Isadora Duncan. Académia, another important club for women, was established in 1915, again by a man, Gustave de Lafreté. The club was named in gratitude to Plato, who in his *Laws* proclaimed the same obligations for women as for men in protecting the city-state. (It must be remembered that in 1915 France was at war with Germany.)

Fémina-Sport began to sponsor matches in soccer, rugby (then called barette in France), and bicycling. In 1917 it organized the first French national championship in track and field. Women performing in the stadium?! Scandalous! Those first sportswomen who dared to brave public opinion and to bring shame on their families were viewed as wild, emotionally disturbed, fanatic women using sport only as an occasion for a brawl. The first national track and field championship in

<sup>2</sup>Pierre de Coubertin, "Les Sports da Neige: I. Leiges, Toboggans, Bobsleighs." *La Revere Olympique* (Jan. 1908).

<sup>3</sup>*Eyquem, La Femme et Le Sport.* (Paris: 1944).

France occasioned the first scandal when it was learned that Violette Gouraud-Moriss, winner of the shot-put, had had her breasts removed to better perform her event.

In December of 1917, the leaders of the women's sports clubs in France, all men, created the first national women's sports federation and called it the *Fédération des Sociétés Féminines Sportives de France*. Madame Alice Milliat, a member of *Fémina-Sport* and a rowing enthusiast was elected treasurer. Alice Milliat was on her way to becoming a highly controversial and dominant figure in international sport for women.

Madame Milliat proved herself so capable that by June of 1918 she became the General Secretary of the French federation and the following March (1919), she was elected to the presidency by a unanimous vote. That same year, under her direction, the Federation organized championships in field hockey, association football, basketball, and swimming. By 1920 the leadership of the organization, originally established by men, was exclusively female. It was in 1920 that the first international match in which French women took part was held in England where they participated in four soccer matches.<sup>4</sup>

Though no supporting evidence could be found in the official publications of the International Olympic Committee, Dr. F. Messerli, a former historiographer for the IOC, wrote in 1952 that women in the sporting world made strong pleas to the IOC to incorporate women's track and field events in the Olympic Games of 1920 and 1924.<sup>5</sup> Until this period in Olympic history, women had competed officially only in tennis, swimming, and ice-skating.

The International Olympic Committee and the International Amateur Athletic Federation refused to concern themselves with women's track and field. Their rejection prompted Madame Milliat to prepare for the next step in advancing the cause of women in sport. Those who have written about her believe that Milliat's ideas were crystallized by the success of a women's international meeting at Monte Carlo in March of 1921 in which women from England, France, Italy, Norway and Sweden competed. It was at this stage that she decided upon the formation of an international organization for women which would provide a forum for competition as well as a regulatory

<sup>4</sup>Background information on the development of sports clubs was taken from Eyquem, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-76.

<sup>5</sup>F. Messerli, "Women's Participation To (sic) The Olympic Games" (Lausanne, Switzerland: The I. O. C., 1952), pp. 10.

body for their control. Thus, on October 31, 1921, in Paris, the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI) was born.<sup>6</sup>

Only a woman of Madame Milliat's determination and ability could have accomplished such a feat. For a woman of her time (born in 1884) she was very well educated. She was fluent in several languages, but this ability earned her only a modest living as a translator. She was married and widowed within a short period of time. She did not marry again and had no children and was thus able to spend her energies for the advancement of women's sports, a cause of concern to her. Alice Milliat was a feminist, though she was not outspokenly or militantly so as were many of her sisters in England and the United States.<sup>7</sup> She believed, as did many feminist leaders of the time, that woman suffrage could help bring about acceptance and recognition for women's sports. Evidence of her perception of the relationship between the broader feminist issues and women's participation in sports is clearly visible in a statement made to an interviewer from the women's magazine, *Independent Woman*, in 1934:

Women's sports of all kinds are handicapped in my country by the lack of playing space. As we have no vote, we can not make our needs publicly felt, or bring pressure to bear in the right quarters. I always tell my girls that the vote is one of the things they will have to work for if France is to keep its place with other nations in the realm of feminine sport.

It was not until after World War II that French women obtained the vote and interestingly enough, France's greatest track and field athlete, Micheline Ostermeyer, won two gold medals and one bronze medal in the Olympic Games of 1943.

The FSFI was a very active organization. At its first meeting it began making rules and regulations for international competition, drew up a constitution, and set about making plans for a Women's Olympic Games. These Games were to be held every four years, beginning in 1922. In its fifteen year history (1921-1936) the FSFI held a series of four international competitions of Olympic or world status. Though historians have been vaguely aware of these games, they have failed to recognize their importance to the emergence of women in sport. At the First Women's Olympic Games in Paris in 1922, approximately

<sup>6</sup>F. A. M. Webster, *Athletics of Today for Women*. (London, 1930), pp. 30-32.

<sup>7</sup>Germaine Gagnaux-Bisson, Personal interview with the authors, August, 1974.

<sup>8</sup>Woman's World Games Dramatize Women's Athletics." *Independent Woman*, Vol. XII (Oct. 1934).

20,000 people attended the one-day event. Five nations took part in the program, which was composed of eleven events, six more than the five events allowed by the International Olympic Committee when it admitted women to track and field competition in 1928. One of the events, the 1000 meters, was 200 meters longer than the longest race allowed for women in the Olympic Games at Amsterdam.

A great deal of agitation was aroused in the International Olympic Committee concerning the growing interest of women in international competition. It is abundantly clear to the writers that the International Olympic Committee believed that the current women's sports movement was feminist inspired. Otto Mayer, a former chancellor of the IOC who wrote a history of that body in 1960, wrote that in 1923 the International Olympic Committee discussed the feminist movement and the "abuses and excesses" to which it gave rise.<sup>9</sup> Having decided that it was inevitable for women to want to participate in the national sports of their respective countries, the IOC suggested that the international federations take control of women's activities. The reasons for taking control were somewhat questionable, however. The International Olympic Committee felt that if sports and games were to be promoted for the betterment and improvement of women from the physical and moral point of view, then the soundest line it could adopt was to propose that the international federations properly organize women's sports and see that they competed only in sports suited to their sex. One must assume, then, that in 1923 the IOC thought they were the best judges of what was suitable and proper for women and promoted the governance of women's sports by the international federations only in order to limit and control their growth. This is particularly apparent in view of the recent establishment of an international federation solely for women.

The International Amateur Athletic Federation, governing body for Olympic track and field, took up the rather loose proposal of the IOC in 1923 and empowered its council to draw up rules for taking control of women's track and field. The next year (1921) it adopted rules changes permitting the inclusion of women as members and voted to govern women's track and field.<sup>10</sup> The next petition before the IAAF, which

<sup>9</sup>Otto Mayer, *A Travers Les Anneaux Olympiques* (Paris: 1960), p. 103.

<sup>10</sup>I. A. A. F. Congress Minutes, 1936, p. 19.

was passed, promptly denied women in track and field the right to appear in the Olympic Games of 1924.<sup>11</sup>

The management of women's track and field in the IAAF was delegated to a special commission. Because of the claimed jurisdiction of the FSFI over international competitions, the IAAF's commission began negotiations with the FSFI. After two years, the two bodies reached an agreement. The FSFI agreed to abide by the general rules of the IAAF, but retained power to modify rules regarding specific athletic events. The agreement allowed any affiliate of the IAAF to claim membership in the FSFI if it were requested. The settlement also permitted the FSFI to retain its international games, but not under the same name. The use of the term "Olympic" in the designation "Women's Olympic Games" by Madame Milliat's organization had aroused the ire and indignation of the IOC. The IOC had deemed it historically absurd to title competitions Olympic when they were neither quadrennial nor world-wide. This was but another of the issues in the negotiations with Madame Milliat. Thus, the Second Women's Olympic Games became the Second International Ladies' Games held in Sweden in 1926. Finally, the agreement also included a proposal for a full program of events for women in track and field for the Olympic Games of 1928. However, when this proposal came before the IAAF Congress, some members reacted so violently that only a watered down version of the original program was accepted. The Congress decided that five events would be admitted but only as "an experiment."<sup>12</sup> Madame Milliat was quick to react against the IAAF's decision, but in spite of the FSFI's dissatisfaction with the program, it voted overwhelmingly to accept the IAAF's offer.<sup>13</sup> British women were so opposed to the IAAF's treatment that they boycotted the 1928 Olympic Games, although they had been selected by the experts as the strongest team.<sup>14</sup>

The 800 meters event for women in the Olympic Games of 1928 added fuel to the fires of those who opposed the participation of women in Olympic track and field. Marie-Thérèse Eyquem has stated that the world press fell on this incident, not to deplore the lack of preparation of athletics for this event, but to condemn track and field sports for women altogether.

<sup>11</sup>Webster. *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup>George Pallett, *Women's Athletics*. (Dulwich, England: 1955), p. 34.

<sup>14</sup>A. A. U. *Minutes of the Annual Convention*. 1928, p. 181.

The New York Times reported that 800 meters was too great a distance for female strength and that several competitors had to be carried off the field after the finish. The grand furor caused quite a stir in Olympic circles and those officials who opposed the entrance of women into the Olympic arena used it as a persuasive argument against retaining the program, since it had been allowed only as an experiment. The IOC voted to withdraw the women's program in track and field at its annual meeting in 1929.<sup>15</sup> As a reaction against that decision, Gustavus Kirby, president of the AAU and a United States representative to the IAAF, urgently recommended that the IAAF adopt a resolution which threatened to withdraw all male athletes from the Olympic Games of 1932 unless women were allowed to compete.<sup>16</sup> The Olympic Congress at its meeting in Berlin in 1931 voted in favor of admitting women.<sup>17</sup> This clearly shows that no matter how determined they were and no matter how good their arguments were, women could not get very far without the support and alliance of the male sport establishment. Incidentally, it may be noted that despite Madame Milliat's talent and determination, she might have achieved greater progress for women had she not antagonized the male federations who felt threatened, both by her demands and her accomplishments. Madame Gagneux-Bisson recalled that Madame Milliat had a strong personality and spoke her mind firmly. She had little patience with those who did not agree with her and often made enemies because of her bluntness. This is an opinion corroborated by Avery Brundage, who worked with Milliat on the IAAF's Committee on Women's Sports, and whom Leigh interviewed in 1973. Brundage said of Milliat that she was active for years, that she demanded more and more, and that she made a real nuisance of herself. Had she been a man, her efforts very likely would have been appreciated.

Despite all the controversy over the participation of women in track and field, tie FSFI continued to grow and flourish. The Third Women's World Games were held in the huge Letna Stadium at Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1930. More than 200 athletes from seventeen countries participated in the three-day festival which drew more than 15,000 spectators.<sup>18</sup> World class athletes like Stella Walsh of the New York Central Athletic

<sup>15</sup>*Bulletin Official du C. I. O.* Sept. 1929, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>"Women to Remain in Olympic Games," *New York Times*, May 25, 1930, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup>*Bulletin Official du C. I. O.* July 1931, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup>"The Women's Olympiad," *London Times*, Sept. 9, 1930, p. 5.



Association of Cleveland, later an Olympic gold medalist, competed in these Games. Regardless of the success of the Women's World Games, however, the demands of Madame Milliat and the FSFI for a full Olympic program seemed to fall on deaf ears. The women's program for the 1932 Olympic Games was augmented by only one event.

The FSFI renewed its demand for a full program at the International Amateur Athletic Federation Congress meeting in Los Angeles in 1932. Dr. F. Messerli, the FSFI's representative to the Congress, stated that the FSFI wished to introduce a complete program of track and field athletics in the Olympic Games of 1936 and if the IAAF was not prepared to implement this demand, then the FSFI preferred to have no women's events at all.<sup>19</sup> This ultimatum, in a real sense, was the beginning of the end for the FSFI.

In 1934, the German Amateur Athletic Federation formally proposed that the IAAF take complete governance of women's track and field and end its cooperative venture with the FSFI. In view of that proposal by the German Federation, Madame Milliat quickly reminded the representatives of the FSFI Congress that it was only after the IAAF refused to concern itself with women that she had taken the initiative to organize the FSFI. Mr. Voss of Germany, who had made the proposal, declared that his intention was simply to obtain a complete program for women in the Olympic Games.<sup>20</sup> The IAAF argued that the present dualistic control was expensive and troublesome, that many countries wanted men and women's track and field to be managed by one organization, and that since women's sports did not have the same standing in the International Olympic Committee, women would be best represented by the IAAF.<sup>21</sup> Alice Milliat fought the German proposal and indeed, the IAAF postponed its decision pending further negotiations with the FSFI. Madame Gagneux-Bisson, a former secretary-treasurer of the FSFI told the writers in 1974 that she believed that after witnessing the success and world-wide influence of the women's federation, the IAAF realized its error and sought to retrace its steps by taking complete control of international competitions.

<sup>19</sup>Pallett, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup>Extrait du Procès Verbal du Huitième Congrès de la Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale, 1934. Received from Madame Gagneux-Bisson, July, 1973.

<sup>21</sup>A. A. U. *Minutes of the Annual Convention, 1934*, p. 12.

At its annual meeting in 1934, the FSFI noted the increasing reluctance of the International Olympic Committee to allow the participation of women in all sports. Under the circumstances which existed, the FSFI believed it necessary to seriously reconsider the idea of promoting a Women's Olympic Games which would include all types of sports activities. On the other hand, the FSFI was willing to give up the Women's World Games, indeed the FSFI itself, if only a full program for women was granted in the Olympic Games and under the condition that women have a direct representative on the International Olympic Committee.<sup>22</sup>

Bringing the matter to a head, the following year (1935) Madame Milliat asked the IOC in a letter to exclude all participation by women from the Olympic Games. She explained that women would then be free to organize their own games quadrennially, which would include all the sports regulated by the FSFI. No further discussion was heard on Milliat's proposal, since the letter had to be referred to the international federations involved. The International Olympic Committee then proceeded to reject the proposal of the Women's Technical Committee of the IAAF to include the discus throw and more running events for women in the 1936 Olympic program.<sup>23</sup> The International Olympic Committee was neither willing to allow women a full program in the Olympic Games nor to let the FSFI do it. It would seem, then, that the IOC made deliberate attempts to rid itself of the troublesome thorn in its side.

The negotiations between the specially appointed IAAF Commission and the FSFI resulted in three main proposals being brought before the IAAF Congress in 1936: 1) that the IAAF recognize the world records as reported and validated by the FSFI, 2) that a complete program of sports for women in the Olympic Games be established, and 3) that the Fifth Women's World Games be held as scheduled for Vienna in 1938. Acting upon the German proposal of 1934, the Commission of the IAAF proposed that the IAAF take complete control of women's track and field. It voted to recognize the records kept by the FSFI for regulated championships, but refused to allow the Women's World Games for 1938. The fifth Women's World Games would become the first European Championships in track and field and would be directed by the IAAF. The IAAF did

<sup>22</sup>Extrait du Procès.

<sup>23</sup>Bulletin Officiel, April 1935, pp. 6, 14-15.

not promise any enlargement of the women's Olympic program, but proposed a program of nine events.<sup>24</sup>

The FSFI had no recourse to this decision; all its cards had been played. The IAAF was the body officially recognized by the IOC to conduct Olympic competitions in track and field. There was certainly little sympathy for the FSFI within the ranks of the IOC, therefore, no official channel was open to appeal that decision.

The FSFI had grown from a membership of five nations in 1921 to a membership of thirty nations in 1936. It was an organization in full prosperity, only to disappear completely from the athletic scene. Thus vanished the only association which had championed the cause of women athletes from its inception. The FSFI never met again after the decision of the IAAF, neither to accept or reject the IAAF's decision, to carry out its threat to re-institute the Women's Olympic Games, nor to officially disband the organization.<sup>25</sup> For all legal purposes, one must assume that the FSFI still exists.

The treatment they received at the hands of Olympic officialdom embittered many women in the movement. This feeling is shown in a statement by Marie-Thérèse Eyquem, who said: "Those who had not wanted to assume the risks of a hazardous beginning showed themselves eager to gather the fruits of the labors of others."<sup>26</sup> The efforts of Madame Milliat and the FSFI, though opposed at practically every turn, greatly accelerated the development of serious international sports competition for women. Madame Germaine Gagneux-Bisson, Secretary Treasurer of the FSFI in 1936 indicated in a letter to Leigh her belief about the contributions made by this movement. "The initiative taken by Madame Milliat and the subsequent success of the FSFI served to sensitize the athletic milieu, which did not want to hear about women."<sup>27</sup> Had it not been for Madame Milliat and the FSFI, the entrance of women to Olympic participation in track and field would have come about only much later. Prior to 1936, the IOC and the IAAF had been interested in gaining control of women's athletics only to control them and to slow them down, not to promote them. By 1936, however, the situation was different. Now that women's sports in general had proven a success and now

<sup>24</sup>I. A. A. F. *Congress Minutes*, 1936.

<sup>25</sup>Germaine Gagneux-Bisson, Letter to M. Leigh, July, 1973.

<sup>26</sup>Eyquem, *La Femme et Le Sport*. p. 57.

<sup>27</sup>Gagneux-bisson, *op. cit.*

that women's achievements could be used for ideological and nationalistic purposes, the male federations were eager to include and to promote them. But then, that is another story.