

“Beyond Women’s Powers of Endurance”: The 1928 800-Meter and Women’s Olympic Track and Field in the Context of the United States

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In the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam, women officially competed in track and field for the first time. After a world-record-breaking 800-meter final, the press inaccurately reported that the runners collapsed at the finish and generally called for the race to be eliminated since it called too greatly on feminine strength. In intervening years between the 1928 and 1932 Olympics, the IOC and IAAF voted to eliminate the race from the program. A fuller understanding of 800-meter race, within a broader American cultural milieu about women’s health and sport, demonstrates how the media and sport governing bodies intersect with ideologies of femininity.

Keywords: athletics, femininities, media, Olympics

On August 2, 1928, nine runners lined up for the final of the women’s 800-meter race, including racers from Germany, Japan, Sweden, Canada, the United States, and Poland. While completing the nearly half-mile race, the runners stayed in a close pack. After rounding the last turn, Germany’s Lina Radke took a clear lead. At the same time, Japanese runner Kimue Hitomi surged forward, jostling Jean Thompson as she passed the Canadian runner. As she sprinted down the final stretch, Radke turned her head, checking Hitomi’s progress as she closely trailed in second place. Thompson, slowed by Hitomi, began to fade until her fellow countrywoman, Fanny “Bobbie” Rosenfeld, in what historian Ron Hotchkiss called an act of “remarkable sportsmanship,” caught up to her and cajoled her forward. Radke broke the tape first, setting a new world record of 2 minutes, 16 $\frac{4}{5}$ seconds, an impressive 9 $\frac{1}{5}$ seconds faster than her time in the qualifying heat and besting her own record by seven seconds. Hitomi crossed the finish line shortly after, followed by Inga Gentzel (Sweden), Thompson, Rosenfeld, and Florence MacDonald (United States), all breaking the previous world record. As the remaining racers crossed the finish line, one woman, likely the racer wearing bib number 119, C. Kilosówna of

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Poland, fell headlong on the ground, was immediately helped up and walked off the track.¹ The race ended as many other hard-fought record-breaking performances do: with some runners celebrating their victory, others crying in disappointment, and yet others recovering from strenuous physical exertion.²

English-speaking media outlets did not view the end of the race as typical. Various newspapers reported that at the end of the race only two women remained standing. The others laid on the ground “sobbing,” “convulsed,” and “covered with dirt,” wrote John T. McGovern in his recap for the *Sportsman*.³ Wythe Williams of the *New York Times* reported that “six out of the nine runners were completely exhausted and fell headlong on the ground.”⁴ According to William Shirer’s assessment of the race in the *Chicago Tribune*, MacDonald fell unconscious to the ground after her finish and took “several minutes” to “regain strength enough to stand up,” while Hitomi required fifteen minutes to be revived after nearly beating Radke to the finish.⁵ Lou Marsh’s play-by-play report for Toronto readers exclaimed that the “Canadian girls gave all they had and collapsed at the finish.”⁶ The special correspondent for the *Times* (London) described the runners as “prostrate and obviously distressed forms lying on the grass at the side of the track after the race” and worried that the race left “the impression that such things should not be.”⁷ A special cable to the *Montreal Daily Star* complained that the race was “obviously beyond women’s powers of endurance, and can only be injurious to them.” The Canadian sportswriter succinctly summed it up: all the racers “finished in a state of exhaustion.”⁸ Some of the papers couldn’t hide their revulsion at the exhaustion of the runners. The *Times* called the race “not a very edifying exhibition,” while Knute Rockne, reporting for the *Pittsburgh Press*, said “It was not a very edifying spectacle to see a group of fine girls running themselves into a state of exhaustion.”⁹

Among the (male-dominated) media, the consensus seemed to be that the participants in the women’s 800-meter race ran themselves into such a state of fatigue that they collapsed. However, the veracity of this narrative is questionable at best. Footage of the race indicates that most of the finishers remained standing upon completing the race and that all walked into the infield. Rather than celebrating this great running feat, distorted news reports from 1928 instead wrote “what would suit the purpose of the male-dominated administration.”¹⁰

Even though negative descriptions of the women’s 1928 800-meter race proved inaccurate, their damage had been done. Over the next few years, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and other sport governing bodies, such as the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF), debated whether or not women’s track and field should be included on the program at all. Though they ultimately decided to keep the sport on the program, the 800-meter race was eliminated from Olympic contention for the next thirty-two years until its reinstatement in the 1960 Games.

Previous scholarship provides some analysis of this specific event, but much of this research is limited to descriptions of the race as part of a larger narrative about gender, politics, and health. For example, historians Kevin Wamsley and Gertrude Pfister view the race as illustrative of the politics of gender within the IOC and the larger Olympic movement.¹¹ Wamsley and Guy Schultz placed the race within a larger context of control of women’s athletics, with particular emphasis on the IAAF and IOC.¹² Descriptions of the race, along with the aftermath and subsequent elimination of the event can be found in various analyses of the progress of women’s track and field at the Olympics. Stephanie Daniels and Anita

Tedder, for example, discuss the race as part of the introduction of women's events in the early twentieth century.¹³ Ron Hotchkiss focuses his description of the event on Jean Thompson and Bobbie Rosenfeld as part of his detailed history of the first Canadian women's Olympic track and field team.¹⁴ Other historians, such as Susan Cahn, Jaime Schultz, and Lindsay Parks Pieper recognize the potential of the race as indicative of prevalent ideas about the fragility of women's bodies and the ability of women to withstand vigorous and strenuous physical competition.¹⁵ Sport scholar Mark Dyreson argued that "the 800-meter race in Amsterdam highlighted the strains inherent in the American practice of packaging female athletes as both icons of liberty and objects of desire."¹⁶

The work of these sport historians brings to light important themes in the history of women's sport, especially at the international and Olympic level. However, few historical studies provide in-depth analysis of the 800-meter race itself or its context within the cultural forces around sport in the United States. Building on this previous historical work, I argue that a fuller understanding of the 800-meter race, within a broader American cultural milieu about women's health and sport, demonstrates how the media and sport governing bodies intersect with ideologies of femininity. In particular, the 800-meter race highlights a tension between progressive American ideologies about equality and liberty that allowed women to compete and be celebrated for their accomplishments and the limiting and regressive beliefs about femininity and women's physical fragility.

The reactions of sport governing bodies in the United States, such as the American Olympic Committee (AOC) and the Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation (NAAF), show that those who held powerful positions in sport preferred women's athletics to remain in its own, less strenuous and less competitive sphere. American press reports, including those about the race itself, its subsequent elimination from the Olympic program, and women's strenuous sport in general, coupled with scientific research in medicine and physical education, place the reactions of these governing bodies within a cultural environment that sought to limit and restrain women's participation in vigorous sport. Although this singular event was international, placing the 800-meter race within the context of the United States illustrates how ideas about femininity, the media, and national sporting bodies connect to one another and contribute to limitations on women's sporting opportunities and their entrance into what historian Mark Dyreson called the "sporting republic." A complete understanding of the 800-meter race and its legacy recognizes that women had a complicated relationship with the American sports world. American success, especially on the international stage, helped many Americans maintain their sense of cultural superiority, allowing many to even celebrate victorious female Olympians. However, ideas about femininity and female fragility created a culture where many Americans could not fully embrace and support U.S. women athletes participating in strenuous, competitive sport.

The Sporting Republic

The sporting republic, according to Dyreson, "symbolizes both the popular fascination with sport and the basic intersection of political and athletic ideals in American civilization."¹⁷ In the early twentieth century, "sporting republicans" viewed sport as

a way to enact progressive social reforms, build community and national identity, and enhance national well-being. Sport was, for these proponents, a “basic cultural organizing principle for an entire nation.”¹⁸ U.S. victories at the Olympic Games symbolized the success of this nation-building project and the “superiority of American society.”¹⁹ Though the connections between sport and progressive political visions weakened after World War I, “athlete sentimentalists, Olympic patrons, and media commentators” still found truth in the ideology.²⁰ This is evident nearly a decade into the postwar era, in Major-General Douglas MacArthur’s presidential report for the American Olympic Committee in 1928 where he claimed that “Nothing is more synonymous of national success than is our national success in athletics.”²¹ For MacArthur and other American Olympic supporters, American “athletic escutcheon” symbolized the unique success of the United States’ republican project and the nation’s strength, freedom, and self-reliance.²²

The sporting republic had significant limitations. Although some feminists, suffragettes, and progressive women advocated for female presence in the sporting republic, most nationalist rhetoric associated with this ideology tended toward masculinity as espoused by President Theodore Roosevelt.²³ The benefits women and girls received from sport and physical education reflected patriarchal gender roles and Victorian notions of womanhood. Whereas sport provided men with proper training for a competitive and powerful life, for women, it bred the ability to “mother a ‘strenuous’ race” and create “stable families.”²⁴ By the 1920s, women gained both the right to vote and “citizenship in the sporting republic.”²⁵ Athletic women, especially those in acceptably feminine sports, such as swimming, only gained access to the sporting republic because they could be viewed as “objects of desire,” valued for their appearance and sex appeal. This clash between freedom and objectification indicated the difficulty that American women had in entering the Olympics and other elite sport.

The tension between athletic success representing national superiority and patriarchal gender roles is exemplified in reactions to the 800-meter race in 1928. While sporting republicans and “athletic sentimentalists” of the late 1920s could have celebrated the world-record-breaking performance of Florence MacDonald as symbolic of American grit and determination (especially since she was the third ranked runner on the U.S. team), most chose to disparage the event and the participants as incapable of such a feat of endurance. Many went on to support the elimination of the race from Olympic contention and agreed that it was too strenuous for women’s fragile physiology. Thus the 800-meter race signifies the difficulty women had in entering the sporting republic. The reactions of the media indicated that public demonstrations of physical strain and exhaustion remained unfeminine and counter to the supporting role women played in the sporting republic. Even as American women gained greater access to the Olympic Games, they still struggled to access the sporting republic, especially in track and field.

American Women in Track and Field

Women’s Olympic sport struggled to find footing in the early twentieth century, even as the modern Olympic movement gained traction, at least in part due to founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin’s personal views on women’s sport. Reflective

of the ideology of the Victorian era, Coubertin believed that sport developed male sporting bodies and masculine character; therefore, women's participation in sport harmed the sport itself and "destroyed their feminine charm."²⁶ Despite Coubertin's adamant opposition to women's sport, female athletes unofficially participated in the Games in 1900, with official acceptance onto the Olympic program in 1912, with the addition of women's swimming. The IOC added tennis in 1920 and by 1924, included skating on the official program.²⁷

Women in sports like swimming, tennis, and skating maintained an acceptable form of femininity and posed less of a threat to the IOC's masculine ideology. Introducing track and field, considered less feminine, to the women's Olympic program proved difficult. The battle for the acceptance of women's track and field to the Olympic program began with Alice Milliat and the *Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale* (FSFI), which became the international governing body of women's sport in 1921. The FSFI hosted the first Women's Olympic Games in Paris in 1922 to provide an international opportunity for women's competition and because the IAAF and IOC refused to hold these contests due to their belief that women should compete "only in sports suited to their sex."²⁸ The one-day event drew 20,000 spectators, who watched women from five nations compete in eleven events.²⁹

Because of the introduction of the Women's Olympic Games in 1922, American women took to the track. Though some American women previously competed in track and field events (for example, at women's colleges) the first significant national track and field meet for women took place in Mamaroneck, New York in 1922. This meet, along with two other competitions in the Midwest and Los Angeles, determined the roster for the United States' first-ever appearance in an international track and field meet at the Women's Olympic Games in Paris. American women even had the opportunity to compete in longer runs, because the FSFI included both the 300-meter and 1000-meter races. In a description that seemed to foresee the 1928 800-meter race, Lucile Godbold, who finished fourth in the 1000-meter, recalled that at the end of the race, "the girl in front of [her] fell sprawling."³⁰ However, unlike the press reports from 1928, American newspapers did not call attention to the collapsing runner, or even make much mention of the race at all.³¹

After the success of the Women's Olympic Games, the IOC and IAAF recognized a growing interest in women's competition and as historians Florence Carpentier and Jean-Pierre Lefèvre note, the IAAF (and the IOC) felt that the "domination and power of men in organized sport were threatened."³² Rather than allow for the continuation of successful women's sport, led by women like Milliat, the all-male memberships of the IOC and IAAF preferred the sentiment: "sport is the affair best led by men."³³

The FSFI slowly ceded control of women's athletics. Although the IAAF officially controlled women's track and field, the FSFI still maintained a degree of influence over the sport, particularly as the organization continued to host international track and field competitions while the IOC excluded women from the Olympic program.³⁴ In 1926, the IOC followed the IAAF's recommendation and added women's track and field to the program for the 1928 Games. Though the FSFI included eleven events at the International Women's Games, the IOC restricted the official program for the Games in Amsterdam to five events.³⁵ The IAAF saw the events as a trial or exhibition rather than a new, exciting, and long-lasting addition to the program.

Either news traveled slowly or Milliat was purposefully left out—in spite of the fact that the IOC accepted the IAAF proposal at their May 1926 meeting in Lisbon, Milliat wrote to the IOC in November 1926 asking whether track and field would be on the upcoming Olympic program.³⁶ This demonstrates just how much power IAAF President Sigfrid Edström and the IAAF had wrested from Milliat and the FSFI. By taking power away from Milliat, who for years managed and organized international women's track and field exclusively, the IAAF signaled that they now controlled the sport and would make the decisions they deemed appropriate. By 1928, the FSFI had little choice but to surrender to the male-dominated IAAF and IOC.³⁷

The growth of women's track and field in the United States demonstrates both the progressive aspects of sporting republicanism and limiting factors related to femininity and women's physiology. During the 1920s, in the United States, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) took over as the governing body of American women's track and field. In some ways, the AAU looked more forwarding-thinking than the IAAF. For example, the AAU Women's Track and Field Committee, chaired by Fred L. Steers, included four women members. Despite the inclusion of women on the committee, ideas about women's physical capabilities and frailties still permeated their decision-making. The AAU limited endurance running events, with the 100-yard dash as the longest race from 1923-1925, adding only the 220-yard dash in November 1925. AAU rules permitted women track and field athletes to compete in no more than two track events per day, and upon the addition of the 220-yard dash, limited those athletes to that event only. Steers cheered the inclusion of the 220-yard dash in his annual report to the AAU convention, but supported AAU regulations that limited women's participation in those races, for fear that further exertion would be harmful to them.³⁸

Women's track and field in the United States was not only limited by the AAU, but also faced criticism from the Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletics Federation. The Women's Division, comprised mostly of female physical educators, opposed the "wrong" kind of competition often espoused by organizations like the AAU. Sport historian Jaime Schultz noted that the platform of the Women's Division, which called for women's athletics to be done playfully, away from commercialized settings and excessive competition, received support from numerous women physical educators.³⁹ Though the Women's Division called for athletics to be both for and governed by women, their focus on limiting competition in many ways stymied women's participation and was at odds with the mission of the AAU, who hoped American athletes would find success at international competitions.

Following the events officially added to the 1928 Olympic program, the AAU altered its own national championship meet, particularly by adding the 800-meter race into contention. This programmatic change reflected American hopes for athletic dominance in Amsterdam, even if it meant allowing women in events that were believed to be physically harmful to them. The results of early 800-meter races sponsored by the AAU proved worrying for track and field boosters. When the organization included the race as a special event in 1927, Marcelle Barkley's winning time of 2:36 $\frac{3}{5}$ caused Steers to worry that the United States would not be competitive with European women at this distance, which he voiced in his annual report to the AAU.⁴⁰ Newspapers concurred. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* fretted that

“The 800-metre race, practically half a mile, may be difficult for Americans because they seldom attempt competitions in that distance.”⁴¹ Coverage of 800-meter races in pre-Olympic meets subtly hinted that American women were unable to successfully compete at the distance. The *New York Times*, reporting from the Metropolitan championship meet, described first-place finisher Catherine Donovan (a record holder at the distance) as finishing “with a rush” but that the third-place runner was “rather exhausted” at the completion of the race and that the fourth-place competitor “barely jogged over the line.”⁴² Public outlets and administrators alike feared that the performance of the U.S. women would not uphold the standards of American athletic success.

AAU officials and sports reporters remained hopeful at the Olympic trials, however. At the meet held in Newark, New Jersey, Rayma Wilson had an “impressive” record breaking performance, finishing fifteen feet ahead of Dee Boekmann. Third place (and the final Olympic spot) went to Florence MacDonald.⁴³ While MacDonald would go on to finish sixth in the Olympic Games (as one of the runners who broke the world record) both Wilson and Boekmann finished last in their qualifying heats in Amsterdam.⁴⁴

The slow progress of women’s track and field in the United States and the consensus among sport organizing bodies like the AAU and the popular press that American women were not qualified for endurance running reflected larger cultural forces. Unlike international sport federations, such as the IOC and IAAF, organizations in the United States did not rely solely on men’s opinions to limit women’s sport. Ideas that women could not or should not take part in intense, vigorous activity and competition were supported by many female members of the AAU and were part of the platform of the all-women membership of the Women’s Division. During this time, ideas about femininity, health, and women’s physical (in)capabilities persisted in many facets of sport and physical education. For American women, full entrance into the sportsworld was hampered by ideologies of gender and femininity that painted women and girls as weak and fragile—beliefs that were not only embraced by male gatekeepers in sport, but also by female physical educators.

Femininity, Health, & Athleticism in the Early Twentieth Century

Women’s entrance into the sporting republic was inhibited not just by organizational structures, but also those health professionals and physical educators who ascribed to ideologies that were harshly critical of active women and girls. This mindset likely permeated both the American press and U.S. sport institutions. These sentiments were rooted in persistent beliefs about the link between acceptable femininity and health. In the early twentieth century, through the 1920s, social critics, physicians, and physical educators alike voiced opinions about what types of physical activity were appropriate for white middle-class women and girls. Furthermore, these viewpoints often conflated what was considered healthy with what was considered feminine.

Much of the literature concerning femininity and health in the 1920s stemmed from Victorian era ideologies. In the late nineteenth century, medical professionals

believed that menstruation and reproduction weakened women's physical health, thus making vigorous physical exercise impossible. As historian Susan E. Cayleff notes, these restrictions on women's activity illustrated a belief "which posited that women's entire system was built around, and relentlessly affected by, her ovaries."⁴⁵ While white Victorian women did participate in physical education and sport to a degree, in the eyes of physicians, other medical professionals, and oftentimes physical educators, they risked reproductive harm and were limited by their menstrual cycles. According to sport historian Patricia A. Vertinsky, "The demands of periodicity were monthly reminders that nineteenth-century women could not and should not play the game like men."⁴⁶

Concerns about the relationship between women's reproductive health and their participation in vigorous, competitive sport continued into the twentieth century. Some researchers questioned the ability of adolescent girls to partake in education, as they, according to physician F.R. Burnham, could not be expected to do the same intellectual and physical work as boys, since girls suffered from physical strain as their reproductive systems developed during puberty.⁴⁷ Responses to Burnham's paper (which appear alongside the article in the *California State Journal of Medicine*) generally agreed with his analysis. Dr. Ray L. Wilbur took the conclusion a step further, recommending that girls who "show[ed] at the beginning of her menstrual life mental or physical strain" should be "remove[d] from the classroom."⁴⁸

However, at turn of the twentieth century, attitudes about femininity, athleticism, and health shifted, illuminating a tension between ideologies that advocated for women and girls to participate in physical activity while also discouraging involvement in competitive sport. Physical educators and medical professionals in the United States began to recognize the potential health benefits of exercise for women and girls and realized that monthly menstruation did not inhibit their ability to take part in physical activity. But, they remained cautious in their assessment of women's physical capabilities, rarely promoting women's participation in competitive, elite athletics.

Women and girls, as argued by Professor of Midwifery and the Diseases of Women, R.W. Johnstone, benefitted from a "happy medium" of too little and too much strain and did not need to treat menstruation as a disease or disability.⁴⁹ Research also dispelled myths that monthly menses caused poor athletic performance. As a professor of physical education at Purdue University, Gertrude Bilhuber's studies demonstrated that menstruation did not affect motor skills. Her investigation revealed that no significant differences in motor skills tests existed between women who did not experience menstrual discomfort, healthy women who suffered moderate or severe dysmenorrhea, and healthy men.⁵⁰

Despite a better understanding of women's physical capabilities and research that disproved that women's performance suffered during monthly menses, many physical educators still did not approve of women's competitive sport. These attitudes led to the formation of the Women's Division of the NAAF, created in 1923 for the "building up of a sane, constructive, educational program for women's and girl's activities which should be planned with their special needs *as women and girls* always in mind."⁵¹ This committee, chaired by Lou Hoover, wife to future president Herbert Hoover, and comprised of women, including Louise French, Helen Frost, J. Anna Norris, Ethel Perrin, Helen McKinstry, Blanche M. Trilling, and Agnes R. Wayman, aimed to create sport and physical education to benefit all

women and girls and encouraged athletes to avoid the "wrong" kind of competition.⁵² Endorsed by several physical education organizations, women's colleges, and physical education schools, the Women's Division wanted female athletes to avoid overly commercialized and excessive competition.⁵³

American physical educators echoed these concerns about competition in research articles and editorials. E.H. Arnold concluded in the *American Physical Education Review* that "national or international competition is a menace to womanhood," because of the anatomical and functional "peculiarities" of the female body.⁵⁴ He argued that a woman's stature, strength, weight, and wider pelvis made throwing, jumping, running, walking, and even standing more difficult. Endurance competitions also proved impossible because the female athlete "tires easier."⁵⁵ An editorial featured in April 1924 concluded that women's physiology, including "relatively larger organs below the diaphragm, and smaller ones above the diaphragm," "more adipose tissue and less muscle" at the hips and thighs, a lower center of gravity, and slower metabolic rate caused women to "do better in exercise of moderate endurance" and fair worse in "heavy gymnastics and in those competitive games which require heart and lung power."⁵⁶

Supporting the mission of the Women's Division and following the precautions suggested by both male and female educators, women physical educators exercised caution in promoting vigorous, competitive sport. Historian Martha H. Verbrugge summed up the physical education guidelines: they "charted a middle course between what one prospective teacher called 'excessive caution' and 'reckless disregard.'"⁵⁷ Because of this, physical educators treaded carefully. One physical educator, Frances A. Hellebrandt, thought theories that menstruation was a disability were superstition, but still concluded "It is far better to err on the safe side" rather than offer wholesale support of women participating in sport during menses.⁵⁸ A physical education professor at the State University of Iowa, Elizabeth Halsey, similarly concluded that current evidence did not support notions that vigorous exercise endangered women, but agreed that it was "best to err on the side of safety and consider the objection valid."⁵⁹ M.E. Watson, a school medical officer, believed that exercise could relieve menstrual ailments, such as dysmenorrhea, but still restricted her students participation in vigorous sport during menstruation to give "parents more confidence that the medical officer was competent."⁶⁰ The practice of physical educators was rooted not only in their knowledge of physiology and exercise, but also in concern for the cultural standards of femininity.

Cultural critics also expressed concern not only over women's physical health, but also over the mental strain of competitive sport. Physicians and physical educators expressed anxiety that a woman's emotional and nervous health would suffer with competitive activity.⁶¹ Journalist Sarah Addington repeated this sentiment, asserting, "The nervous strain in such contests is tremendous and uses up more vital energy than most girls have to give."⁶² Frederick Rand Rogers, a medical doctor concerned with education, argued that women were not suited for competition, physically or mentally (especially running) and that men handled the consequences of elite competition better than women.⁶³ He viewed intense competition as "a menace to the future happiness of all girls who are lured into Olympic, or even intensive interschool, competition."⁶⁴ The consensus of physical educators, medical professionals, and cultural critics seemed to be that women could not and should not risk competing in strenuous sport.

In terms of Olympic track and field, especially the 800-meter race, these ideologies indicate a conflict between women's success in international sport and beliefs about women's physiology and ability to take part in vigorous, competitive athletics. Even within the progressive social ideology of the sporting republic, nationalism was equated with masculinity. For sporting republicans, national pride in sport was best left to the men; rather than openly embrace female athletes, they maintained cultural values that discouraged women from competing. Research from medical experts and physical educators that warned against competitive sport for women provided a convenient justification for national and international sport organizers to limit female athletics. This created a difficult path for women athletes to be successful, as many participants struggled to maintain an acceptable form of femininity. The visible physical strain of running 800 meters (and of taking part in other demanding sporting events) created athletes who failed to be feminine enough. The reactions the American press had to the 800-meter event, viewed within a cultural milieu that valued a specific kind of femininity and disapproved of competitive sport for women, demonstrated that women had not yet fully entered the sporting republic in the 1920s.

Media Reactions to the 800-meter Race in Amsterdam

Attitudes, like those espoused by the American press and by U.S. physical educators and cultural critics that questioned feminine frailty and disapproved of women's competitive sport, permeated the coverage of the Olympics in Amsterdam. In the lead up to the Games, writers articulated both apprehension about women competing in the event and hopefulness that the American women's accomplishments could generate national pride. With the first women's Olympic track and field contest looming, Richard E. Danielson, writing for the *Sportsman*, expressed concern about sport and femininity. He claimed that Americans were uncomfortable with the idea of women participating in track and field, noting that "Some of our leading students of the subject are convinced that woman's place is in the home."⁶⁵ Sportswriter W.O. McGeehan optimistically acknowledged that women athletes' accomplishments on the track could bolster the American team's performance. However, he jeered their "physical inferiority" when compared to male athletes and disparaged female tracksters as "glorified tomboys."⁶⁶ After the Games, some news outlets rejected women's sport broadly. *Negro World* reported that "the competition is much too strenuous for the fair sex," extending the criticisms of women's track and field to the black community.⁶⁷ The author went on to mention a Frenchwoman in the stands crying "Stop the cruelty" in reaction to the women's 100-meter track race.⁶⁸

About the race itself, most newspapers reported on the event as if it were a disaster. A few outlets did just outline the factual aspects of the race—including the top six finishers, their times, and the fact that all broke the world record—however, many added commentary about the acceptability of women running 800 meters.⁶⁹ Even the initial reports from the Associated Press took the race at face value, acknowledging that Florence MacDonald's sixth-place-finish was the best American track performance of the day and called the race "sensational" and the winner, Radke, "sturdy."⁷⁰

The dominant narrative in the English-speaking press, however, was a sensationalist account of the women's performance focused on the frailty of the runners and

the unacceptability of the race for women. Wythe Williams, writing for the *New York Times*, decried the event as "too great a call on feminine strength."⁷¹ Other writers predicted the future demise of the race, such as the *Chicago Tribune's* William Shirer. The sportswriter concluded his report of the race quoting Coach Lawson Robertson: "'The event ought to be cut out. It's too much for any woman.'" Apparently, according to Shirer, "Scores of coaches and trainers agreed."⁷² Knute Rockne believed because of the "state of exhaustion" displayed by the runners that the American trainer should have refused to permit U.S. women from running the race. Rockne concluded "If running the half mile for women is an athletic event, then they ought to include a six-day dancing contest between couples. One is as ridiculous as the other."⁷³

In their recaps of the Games, published weeks after the competition closed, both John T. McGovern and Hugh H. Baxter recalled the performance of the female runners. Because the women appeared exhausted, McGovern, writing for the *Sportsman*, called the race "pathetic and humiliating" and praised the United States for opposing the inclusion of the race from the very beginning.⁷⁴ Baxter, a champion pole-vaulter, criticized women's track and field more generally. He belittled the women's accomplishments, compared the elite Olympic women's abilities to those of 16-year-old boys, and described women's victories in track and field as an "anticlimax."⁷⁵

Despite the widespread agreement among news outlets, visual evidence does not support the conclusion that the 800-meter runners actually collapsed. Roger Robinson of *Runner's World* analyzed footage of the race in 2012 and found that "It all looks pretty much like the finish of any other hard race."⁷⁶ The American runner, Florence MacDonald, interviewed in 2001, vehemently denied that any of the runners collapsed at the finish. She conceded that some sat down after the race, but stories of collapse were "make believe." In fact, MacDonald countered the exhaustion narrative to such a degree that she remembered being "as fresh as a daisy" after the run and that others still had the energy to "run another race."⁷⁷

Whether the reports were accurate or not seemed to have little effect on how the race was remembered, however. Stories of collapsing runners persisted. Only one year after the race, sportswriter John R. Tunis, in a sustained argument against women's commercial, competitive sport, used the 800-meter as an example of women's frailty. "Below us on the cinder path were eleven wretched women, five of whom dropped out before the finish, while five collapsed after reaching the tape," he recalled, "I was informed later that the remaining starter fainted in the dressing room shortly afterward." Despite egregious inaccuracy, including the fact that only nine runners participated in the final, Tunis perpetuated a narrative that women were too frail and incompetent to compete at the Olympic level.⁷⁸ Years later the story snowballed as Ernest "Nick" Carter, a fellow Olympian in 1928, recalled that the 800-meter race "looked like a bowling alley where the fellows rolled the ball and knocked all the pins down" even though no visual evidence corroborated his story.⁷⁹

However, not everyone agreed with this negative analysis of the race. Dr. Hede Bergmann, the examining physician of the women in Amsterdam, believed that eliminating the race was "hasty" and "emotional." She reported that the race finishers were not overexerted and that their health was "in order."⁸⁰ Unlike much of the commentary from men who believed that women's physiology limited their ability to run long distances, Bergmann concluded that any poor performances in 1928 came from inexperience and improper training, not innate physical incapacities.

The press analysis of the 800-meter race showed bias towards women's participation in certain kinds of sporting events, as the media previously reported on women's endurance feats without questioning their vitality. When Gertrude Ederle swam the English Channel in 1926, newspapers in major cities around the United States featured her story on the front page. Ederle's fourteen-and-a-half hour swim, through choppy seas and strong ocean currents, bested the previous record (held by Argentine Sebastian Tiraboschi) by nearly two hours.⁸¹ The articles covering Ederle's accomplishment did not question her endurance; in fact, many commented on her calm, unhurried triumph and claimed that she seemed "far from exhaustion."⁸² Ederle's participation in an acceptably feminine sport, swimming, made her endurance accomplishment suitable for laudatory press coverage, unlike the 800-meter runners. Instead, sportswriters used the half-mile racers as exemplars of unfeminine, exhausted athletes.

Reactions to the race also illustrated the hypocritical way that male and female athletes were treated by the American press. While most of the coverage of the women's "collapse" suggested that this meant women should not compete in the race, the same was not true for male athletes. When men exerted great efforts to win and break records in endurance events the press praised them, even if they collapsed at the finish. Just a day after the 800-meter race, American runner Ray Barbuti won a hard fought 400-meter race. According to Wythe Williams—who only one day before called the women's race "too great a call on feminine strength,"—"Barbuti's supreme effort sent him sprawling headlong to the track" in "regular cannon-ball fashion."⁸³ Rather than dismissing this race as too great a drain on masculine strength, Williams instead described the contest as "one of the most thrilling of the entire games."⁸⁴ Louis C. Schroeder, in his Olympic report for the *American Physical Education Review*, claimed that Barbuti's finish indicated "that he has a great reserve and unlimited amount of grit."⁸⁵ When women plunged across the finish line in hard-fought (and even world-record-breaking) fashion, they faced severe questions about their stamina. When men hurtled to the ground in victory, they enjoyed praise for their strength and resilience.

U.S. media criticisms of the 800-meter race reflected both attitudes about the female body and the acceptability of certain kinds of women's sports. Existing medical and scientific beliefs about women's weak physiology served as a convenient cultural backdrop for pervasive views about proper womanhood. These internalized social values manifested in inaccurate and exaggerated reporting. Perhaps, had journalists not already believed women too weak to withstand the rigors of running two laps around the track, sportswriters would have accurately reported the results of the race. Instead, ideas about feminine frailty and the acceptability of these kinds of sports for women influenced their public reactions and reduced the ability of American women track and field athletes to be taken seriously as sportswomen and members of the sporting republic.

The IAAF and IOC Eliminate the 800-Meter from the Olympic Program

Shortly after the controversial 800-meter race, the IAAF convened and concluded their Ninth Annual Congress at The Hague. Here, they discussed women's track

and field events generally, ultimately rejecting Alice Milliat and the FSFI's proposal to include a full ten event program (including the 100 meter, 200 meter, 800 meter, 80 meter hurdles, 400 meter relay, high jump, running broad jump, shot put, discus, and javelin).⁸⁶ Instead, the committee voted on the events individually, deciding to only include six of the events (the 100 meter, 400 meter relay, 80 meter hurdles, high jump, discus, and javelin) and voting, by a margin of twelve to nine, to reject the 800 meter.⁸⁷

The IOC followed the IAAF shortly thereafter in making decisions about the role of women in the upcoming Olympics. At the IOC meeting held in April 1929 in Lausanne, delegates proposed to the Executive Committee that a number of solutions be undertaken in order to reduce the Olympic program, including excluding women entirely from the Games.⁸⁸ In July 1929, the Executive put forth Article IV, which regulated women's participation and limited it to swimming, tennis, skating, and gymnastics—all events that upheld conventional feminine norms.⁸⁹ The next year, in Berlin, the IOC adopted Article IV, essentially excluding women from Olympic track and field totally.⁹⁰

The decision engendered mixed reactions from U.S. sport organizations. On the one hand, the AOC strongly disagreed with deleting women's track and field from the official program and worried about the possibility of the item being on the agenda for the 1931 meeting in Barcelona. The AOC was under the mistaken assumption that the vote of the program committee (who voted seventeen to nine to keep women's athletics) settled the matter. The AOC reported to the IOC that they unanimously agreed that women be permitted to compete in track and field.⁹¹ The American delegates to the IAAF, led by Gustavus Kirby, threatened to withdraw from the men's competition if women's track and field was not reinstated.⁹² Though they did not provide specific reasons for their demand that women's track and field remain on the program, the potential for American women to add to the nation's medal count seems more likely than the pursuit of gender equality.

On the other hand, in the report of the AOC, Fred L. Steers, manager of the women's track and field team, cheered the IAAF's decision to eliminate the race, claiming that the United States had always been against the inclusion of the 800-meter run.⁹³ Furthermore, the Women's Division petitioned the IOC not to include track and field on the program. The Women's Division cited the potential for exploitation, commercialization, and excessive competition, along with the fact that Olympic events were typically under men's supervision, as reasons to oppose track and field for women in the Olympics. They formally requested that the IOC omit it from the program for 1932.⁹⁴

The U.S. news media did not demonstrate the same tension as American sport bureaucracies. For example, press accounts of the IAAF's discussion on the status of the future of women's track and field noted that members engaged in a "long, hot debate" and that it was a "hotly contested" issue.⁹⁵ While American newspapers provided accurate reporting of the meeting and little editorial comment, they still recalled previous dismissals of the event as too strenuous for women, with both the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* referring to the race as "grueling."⁹⁶ Though the United States press refrained from outright celebration of the banishment of the event from Olympic competition, it still described the race with negative connotation.

Ultimately, the IOC allowed for women to participate in track and field. At the IOC meeting in 1931, members altered Article IV to allow, with a vote of 16 votes to 3, track and field in the Olympics.⁹⁷ This reinstatement of women's track and field, however, included the altered program accepted by the IAAF in 1928, which eliminated the 800-meter race from contention. Thus, the 800-meter run was deleted from the program and would not be seen in Olympic competition again for thirty-two years when it reappeared at the 1960 Games in Rome.

It is difficult to discern exactly why the IOC and IAAF chose to remove the 800-meter race after 1928 and how much cultural expectations of womanhood, medical literature, and media reports influenced the decision-making process of these governing bodies. According to historians Carpetier and Lefèvre, these external factors, including pressure from Alice Milliat and the FSFI, were unlikely to play a role in the IOC's decisions. "[T]he IOC has never capitulated to outside pressures" claimed Carpetier and Lefèvre.⁹⁸ Instead, the federation made decisions based on its desire to exercise control over women's sport.

However, it stands to reason that these external forces played a role in the broader discussions, even if they were not mentioned as a key factor by individual members of the IOC and IAAF. The fact that the 800-meter race was the only event specifically removed from the program (four other events did not garner enough support to be added to the program for 1932, but none were included previously), along with significant open discussions about it at meetings, demonstrated that the race itself proved to be a sticking point for sport's gatekeepers. The meeting minutes of the IAAF Congress in 1928 illustrate the tension surrounding the race, as debate about the women's events incited a "lively discussion" where "several speakers pronounced themselves against the 800 m. race which they thought too hard for women," echoing the talking points of journalists and cultural critics.⁹⁹ The removal of the race from the program, combined with the negative media attention focused on the event, shows that the 800-meter played a significant role in wider understandings of women's endurance running opportunities at the Olympics.

Ideas about femininity, women's fragility, and how they can be traced through both medical/scientific literature and mainstream media, establish the difficulty women had in entering the American sporting republic. Though sporting republicans espoused progressive ideals, they could not surmount the tensions between forward movement for women in other realms of American life and ideas about how active women ought to behave. The 800-meter race, including specific reactions to the event, viewed within larger cultural institutions and ideologies, demonstrates how women athletes in the United States did not progress on an equal and linear path.

While the women's 800-meter race in Amsterdam is not the only instance of women struggling to find footing on an uneven playing field, it does serve as a singular event that can point to inequalities. The race itself highlights attitudes about acceptable femininity prevalent in broader discussions about women's sports. It illustrates that hyperbolic and inaccurate news reports can negatively impact athletics. It demonstrates that ideologies about how women ought to act permeate cultural critiques. Ultimately, it illuminates a common pattern in progress in women's sport: even though the acceptance of women's track and field was a

significant step forward for female athletics, reactions to the race, and its subsequent elimination from the Olympic program, represented the limits on women's sport progress in the United States in the early twentieth century.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Lindsay Parks Pieper and the reviewers from *Sport History Review* for their helpful comments on this article.

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