Engagement of Women in Sport in the Czech Republic and in the Czech SOKOL Organization

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SOKOL is a many-faceted organization guiding its members throughout life, from the early youth to the old age, to physical and moral health, good citizenship and responsible patriotism, combined with continuous self-improvement. This goal is pursued through general physical fitness activities, gymnastics and sports, as well as varied cultural and social activities. Founded in 1862 in Prague, the present capital of the Czech Republic, SOKOL soon spread abroad and was gradually established in 25 other countries.

In 1947 in Czechoslovakia SOKOL's membership exceeded one million and approached two million world-wide. The SOKOL organization is perhaps best known for its famous “Slets” - physical and cultural festivals which encompasses more than 100 years of tradition. In addition to raising the general fitness of the population Sokol members scored impressive successes in many sport activities, most notably in gymnastics, even at the Olympic Games.

For its steadfast adherence to the ideals of freedom and democracy, SOKOL was successively banned and dissolved by all totalitarian regimes and its members subjected to persecution, in the last case for 40 years. The Czech Republic is one of many countries which were hit by the cold war, the consequences of which were in some respect as equally horrifying as those of substantially shorter world wars.

Women always played a large role in SOKOL, and the same is true today. They form a majority, with 98,664 girls and women in a membership totalling 178,992. We SOKOL Women also reestablished the SOKOL rallies: in 1994 we organized the XII All-SOKOL
Rally, in which 23,000 people took part, 14,000 of whom were girls and women from all age brackets in eight exercises. Another 10,000 or so girls and women took part in the sporting competitions.

The involvement of women in sport in the Czech Republic and in the Czech SOKOL Organization can be categorized in two important ways, according to different purposes for taking part in sport.

The first category is competitive sport, where the aim is to take part in competitions. The second is recreational sport, where the purpose is to improve one's fitness.

The first group improves special motor skills based on a specialized training program. Men form a majority in this group. In the second group the reverse is true; women form a majority.

I will focus on this second group. Women are equal partners with men in the most varied of jobs in the technical and commercial fields, women hold down demanding academic posts and work shifts in shops and factories, and when they return home they are faced with yet more work as they try to create a home and look after their children; in spite of all this they still manage to find time for regular exercise.

The question arises, then, why it is that women, the most over-worked group in society, show the greatest interest in organized physical work-outs, and why it is that they are willing to make a conscious effort to exercise regularly.

It seems that sport brings them a sense of physical satisfaction, but also something else. That "something else" is difficult to define, but women who exercise feel it and appreciate it. It is clear that it is not simply a question of physical exertion, but also a question of a feeling of being part of a group, a feeling that links similar interests with a feeling of satisfaction from a beneficial and enjoyable experience of movement.

Women’s emotional attachment to physical exercise and, as the case may be, to sport has deep roots in history, particularly in our country. These roots and traditions influenced and even today continue to influence the conception of women’s physical education. In contrast to men’s conception, experience in women’s groups is marked by a sense of purpose and a lack of ostentation, a detailed and systematic approach to improving fitness, and an effort to improve their overall physical culture. Most women exercise for