IAPESGW 50th Anniversary: Honoring the Legacy - Charting the Future

Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts, USA.

The International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW) was the brainchild of Dr Dorothy Ainsworth who did much of the ground work for the inaugural conference held in Copenhagen in 1949. Dr Ainsworth was Director of Physical Education at Smith College from 1926 to 1960 and so it was fitting that the IAPESGW should return to Smith College to celebrate its 50th anniversary.

Under the leadership of Dr Chris Shelton, Vice President of IAPESGW, the staff of Smith College conducted a wonderful celebration. The Opening Ceremony began with a procession of delegates from 30 countries, many in national dress, into the main auditorium to the applause of a sizable audience of local dignitaries and guests. On the big screen the flag of each country was displayed followed by a slide of an outstanding female athlete from that country.

The Australian connection was instantaneous. Jill Kerr Conway gave the opening address. While Smith College would like to claim her as their own in recognition of her outstanding leadership as President of the College from 1975 to 1985, her books *The Road from Coorain* and *True North* clearly identify her Australian roots. Kerr Conway’s grasp of the central issues for women in sport was evident as she stated most forcefully, “Athletics give permission to women to win. It is a priceless aspect of a woman’s education,” a message repeated in the extensive media coverage.

The significance of the anniversary was marked by the participation of leaders of kindred associations including Donna Lopiano (Women’s Sports Foundation, USA), Sue Neill (International Working Group on Women and Sport) and Gudrun Doll-Tepper (International Council of Sports Science and Physical Education) plus a considerable number of national women’s sports organisations from Japan, Colombia, Uganda, Barbados, Nigeria and Canada.
The conference papers were diverse. Women from war torn countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina discussed the role of sport and physical education in the rehabilitation of traumatized women. Women from Africa described the seemingly impossible odds stacked against them as they strove to empower girls and women through sports like soccer. Women from South America compared and contrasted attitudes of male and female professors in sport-related disciplines. Barbra Barrett shared the positive initiatives of the Australian Sports Commission such as Active Australia and strategies for harassment-free sport. In two short days a myriad of issues were raised and provided very concrete foundations for the final working sessions on the future of the IAPESGW.

Not surprisingly, as the conference celebrated a 50th anniversary, there were several sessions devoted to the history of the IAPESGW. These provided a wonderful opportunity for reflection upon the efforts of former leaders such as Dorothy Ainsworth, Liselott Diem, Helen Tollich and Patricia Bowen-West. It is almost beyond comprehension how to grasp the intricacies of communicating around the world without phone, fax or email, but these women had a vision and were determined that the world should hear about the rights of girls and women to physical activity. These sessions also provided an opportunity for more senior members to make presentations without being intimidated by overhead projectors and powerpoint.

Through the efforts of Canadian M Ann Hall and German Gertrud Pfister, the history of the first 50 years of the IAPESGW has been preserved in the book Honoring the Legacy which was available in time for the conference. It was disappointing, however, that there was no formal launch as such. An opportunity existed when the Dorothy Ainsworth Exhibit was opened in the Smith College Archives housed in the Alumnae Gymnasium. What made this occasion particularly memorable was the setting. Anyone familiar with the history of women's basketball and netball instantly realised that underneath the renovations was the site of the first women's basketball game organised by Senda Beresin in 1891.

The future is bright for the IAPESGW as it will continue its work through collaboration with much younger organisations such as Womensport International and the International Working Group.