

The Special Demands of Modern Athletics on Women- a competitor's perspective.

By Fiona May

Modern athletics by my definition would be athletics that is practiced by both sexes at a high level. Now there is the introduction of events: triple jump, pole vault and hammer throw, athletics for women is more complete and an athlete has a choice in what to specialize in.

"It has been researched that the level of women competing or practicing sport in general has increased over the past 20 years but also there has been a decline of women practicing sport after the age of 21 years." This is a general view but it can be said that I have noticed that there has been a small significant decline of athletes competing at national levels. At the international level there has been an increase of women competing in Championships. Not only from Europe and Northern America and parts of Oceania but there has been a surge of athletes from African nations such as Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa and also Asia such as China, Japan and even Sri Lanka. Therefore there has been an increase of women competitors.

For example, at the World Championships in Helsinki 1983 it was recorded that 458 women participated. In Athens, more than 10 years later in 1997 there were 709 participants less than a 50% increase. Thus we can conclude that the number of women athletes has increased slowly, but is this enough?

With the aspect of being an individual sport, the problems that occur are more evident, and the introduction of the events that have been mentioned earlier, there are needs which should be met in order to encourage and to aid athletes to compete from national to international level into the next millennium. What I have noticed is that there are specific demands at different stages of an athlete starting from a young age.

I have noticed that there tends to be a high dropout level over the period of 16 up to 21 years. I have seen coaches that coach athletes and push them just to get results, not necessarily training for the future. This leads to injury and/or burn-out, where the athlete has nothing left psychologically and physically to continue. Coaches must educate the athlete that it doesn't matter if one wins or loses and provide encouragement to obtain personal success - not only material success. Female athletes tend to feel alienated when they train and compete and if they are successful it can also lead to jealousy from their peers. The athlete feels that they are abnormal or being too masculine, or they believe that they will develop too many muscles and look like a man. What is needed is family and friends who give these athletes help psychologically, reassurance that it is perfectly normal to have talent, being successful and being feminine at the same time. Also at this point the use of role models are needed for them to look up to.

I know that there are differences between the two sexes that we have to consider but it can be seen to have been exaggerated, they either work too hard or too little. But there shouldn't be too much difference so that the athlete believes they are limited. The coach should always regard the athlete as an individual regardless of their sex. They must consider the athletes' strengths and weaknesses for the athlete to mature.

An example would be my experiences of training. I usually trained by myself as there were not many athletes doing the same event. But my coach was convinced that I needed someone to train with. Someone to motivate me. In the end I trained with a male athlete which helped me to improve.

At a certain age, female athletes reach a stage where many other factors of life become important: University or work or even the family. There seems to be a lack of interest to continue training and competing. The pressures mounts when the athlete tries to combine all these factors, which can be very difficult and in the end it is athletics that loses. An athlete has to be very lucky to find a good part-time job and an understanding employer who will give her time-off to compete, for example. Or lucky like their American counterparts receiving scholarships in order to combine the two. In countries like Great Britain and Italy this is not possible as both systems do not leave space to do the both, one of the two has to suffer. In either case there is a tendency to give up or train "just to keep in shape."

If the athlete doesn't have the Federation and/or coach, family and friends to give support, the sport loses a potential competitor. Thus a support for athletes to be able to cope with the pressures is needed or to combine the two.

Not only do we have these problems but we have cultural problems to fight against. As we know there tend to be negative images of women athletes as being masculine - not being feminine and a lot of the athletes are afraid of this. The media is a powerful tool and it must be used in the right way. There are plenty examples of women athletes who are champions and still are feminine. Gone are the myths that one has to be "like a man" to compete. We must use role models to change the way of thinking and to reinforce this by using the media to promote women's athletics.

Moving towards the later stages of an athlete's career, we can see that gone are the days where an athlete retires around the age of thirty. It is not considered to be strange that an athlete doesn't stop competing at that age. We see that they carry on their illustrious careers until their late thirties.

Examples are Jackie Joyner Kersee who only decided to retire in 1998 at the age of 37. Heike Drechsler won the 1998 European Championships at the age of 34. Stefka Kostadinova was the oldest woman to win an Olympic Gold medal at the Atlanta Games - 31 years old. This is only the tip of the iceberg as there are many more athletes who still compete.

With this new phenomenon there is a demand for us athletes to acknowledge the physiological needs in order to train safely and effectively. Medical research must be done to understand fully what the implications are for a mature athlete.

The examples outlined above are based primarily on coaches and sport medics to help satisfy the needs of female athletes, in order to be more perceptive and attentive. But the Federations also play an important role.

In Italy, the male athlete is given the opportunity to compete for military sport groups as the military service is obligatory for men. The female athlete only competes in civil sport clubs. Only a small number of women do get in but really they are thinking of their non-athletic careers. The male athlete receives a fixed wage whereas their counterparts get their money through the club, depending on her performances, which can be inconsistent. The male athlete has the promise of a career after where the other doesn't. Because of these differences the Italian Federation decided to set-up "progetto Donna" project woman that is to assist women athletes along with their clubs. In other countries there are clubs that do not pay their athletes but this has to change as sport has become a full-time job not just a hobby.

I am not saying that All federations must pay their athletes and results will be guaranteed, but they must give support, not only financially, but assist with the preparations vital to any athlete, like medical help - not only when the athlete is injured but in the prevention of injuries.

At a higher level, there is a need of increase the promoting women's athletics. More competition, more role models. Even though there has been an increase of women participating, they're still out-numbered by men. In major meets I have noticed that there tend to be more events for men than for women. Not that I want to criticize but especially with events that have been introduced over the past years, I think it is fair to emphasize more, to increase the level of performances overall and develop women's athletics.

The points that I have made in this paper are very short and based on past experiences. These and many more have to be looked at more deeply in order to understand and respond to the needs we have. Modern athletics has changed drastically. No longer is athletics confined too few nations but to most parts of the world and is steadily growing as we approach 2000. Modern athletics is more complete in the sense that not only the physical aspects are to applied but also psychological and physiological needs that have to be met and met thoroughly.

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