

## In Praise of Female Athletes Who Were Told No

*For the 14 female ski jumpers petitioning to be included  
in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver*

Despite the glory of color it's easy to be the butterfly;  
It's hard to be the dog or to remain like the river stone.  
For Christ sake little lady, sit down you've been told.

Because he thought that a woman short of breath was an affront to good manners,  
Baron Pierre de Coubertin founded the modern Olympics with only the strength  
of men in mind. The heft and depth of sport surely could not be good  
for the reproductive organs of a lady—

In 1896 at the first modern Olympics,  
Stamati Revithi watched the men's marathon and the next day started out  
on her own forty kilometer run. She could not enter the stadium to finish,  
as the men had done the previous day, so with one lap around the entire stadium  
she finished the run that was thought impossible for a woman to complete.

The most unaesthetic sight the human eyes could contemplate, De Coubertin said,  
was the female athlete. In 1922 Alice Milliat held a women's Olympics  
in Paris where eighteen women broke world records in sport.  
De Coubertin demanded that Milliat drop the Olympic moniker from her games.  
She refused until he agreed to integrate ten women's events into the Olympics.  
Milliat dropped the Olympic moniker from her games but Coubertin  
only added five female track and field events to the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam.

For the 1928 games the Canadian women's Olympic team practiced  
for the Olympic relay by passing the baton on the deck of the ship  
that sailed them to Europe. At the same time a contingent of Canadian men  
travelled to Amsterdam to petition the IOC to do the right thing  
and drop female sport from the Olympics. The media called  
the Canadian women's team the *Matchless Six* for their athletic ability.

*The New York Times* called one of them, Ethel Catherwood, "the prettiest girl  
of the games." She became known as the Saskatoon Lily, for her "flower-like face."  
Surely, it was said, the Saskatoon Lily would become a movie star  
but Catherwood was an athlete. She said she would rather gulp poison  
than try her hand at motion pictures. She won gold in the high jump  
and remains the only Canadian women to win a solo gold in track in field.

That same year the women ran the 800 metre race so hard that they crossed  
the finish line and fell to the ground to catch their breath.

The men of the IOC  
found this disquieting. The 800 meter women's race would not be reinstated  
until 1968 in Mexico where Enriqueta Basilio would become the first woman

to light the Olympic cauldron.

Eva Dawes was a weak child and her father thought exercise would strengthen her. He built her a high jumping pit at her school. At a track meet in 1926 she won two gold medals in the under 18 category. The officials then refused to let her jump with the adults until her father walked onto the pitch, grabbed the microphone and pleaded with the crowd to intervene. The officials let Dawes jump again and she won another gold that day.

In 1935 she wanted to see life outside of Ontario so she accepted an invitation to travel to the Soviet Union. When she returned she was suspended from amateur sport for cavorting with communists. The next year she boycotted the Nazi hosted Olympic Games and sailed for Barcelona to compete in the People's Olympiad, championed by trade unions, socialists and communists, then cancelled with the first shots of the Spanish Civil War.

The athlete Fanny Blankers-Koen gave birth to her second child, immediately started training, and six weeks later competed in the 1946 European Championships. By 1948 she was back in shape, held many world records but still the media thought she was too old to represent her country and that she should stay home to take care of her children. She won four gold medals at the 1948 Olympics. They called her *The Flying House Wife*.

In 1973 former Wimbledon singles champion Bobby Riggs claimed that women didn't have the strength to play tennis properly and that he would beat any woman alive

by virtue of his manhood.

He beat Margaret Court on Mother's Day of that year.

He said "I want Billie Jean King.

I want the women's lib leader!" He wore a "Men's Liberation" T-shirt to practice for his match with King and said that he wanted to be the number one chauvinist pig. Tennis player Rosie Casals called Riggs "an old man who walks like a duck, can't see, can't hear and besides," she said, "he's an idiot."

A team of football players carried Billie Jean King into the Astrodome while Bobby Riggs rode in on a chariot pulled by women. Billie Jean King beat him three straight sets in a row.

Listen: here they come again trying to screw things up for the men. In 2005 the President of the International Ski Federation, Gian Franco Kasper, said "Ski jumping is just too dangerous for women. It's not appropriate for ladies from a medical point of view."

The chivalry playbook? For the Continental Cup in Germany the men's ski jumping team slept in a hotel while the women were billeted in a farmhouse and barn, with a pile of manure outside their window, awoken to a farm cat eating their food. Or they slept in a post office in St Moritz, and under a dining room table in Trondheim.

It is easy to be the butterfly. It's hard to sleep in the barn.

Perhaps your breasts are not aerodynamic.  
Perhaps jumpsuits will increase the popularity of your sport.  
"Come her little darling and I'll teach you how to spread your V-style wider."

At the top of the cantilevered tower you envision yourself in flight and prepare your body to react without thought. You tighten the straps of your helmet, position your goggles, slide onto the starting bar to watch the wind work the flags with the possibility of flight as you slide your feet ahead in the track, fold down and zip into the inrun—you feel the compression of the curve. You are over the knoll.

If you bend your knees you lose control.

You master the airfoil and steer with the slightest movement of your hands. You look straight ahead and command every turn and nuance of posture. You are flying. There is no other explanation. Your body is muscle and memory held up by the wind.

**Brad Cran, 2009**

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