



THE WOMEN'S 800 METRES TRACK EVENT Post 1928: QUO VADIS?

by Ian Jobling

I trust readers will forgive the little bit of Latin in the title of this article. The idea of the question "whither thou goest?" arose following my presentation entitled "The Olympic Movement in history and hysteria: the 800 metres track events at the 1928 Amsterdam and 1960 Rome Olympic Games" at the CESH Conference in Crotone, Italy.

As the title implies, the 800 metres event for women was introduced at the Amsterdam Olympics, was "banned" and did not return until the 1960 Rome Olympics. During the presentation, I specifically posed a question I am currently researching: "what happened to the women's 800 metres event in the various countries which had competitors in that event in the 1928 Olympics?" So, this article is more about seeking help and/or collaboration than in enlightenment. But, before getting down to some specifics about the assistance/collaboration, some background information might be helpful.

Although women had participated in archery, tennis, swimming and diving, fencing and gymnastics (exhibition) at previous Olympics, it was not until the 1928 that track and field events for women were first introduced in Olympic Games conducted by the IOC.²

Track and field events were part of the "Women's Olympics" (the name was changed to Women's World Games) of 1922, promulgated by Madame

Alice MILLIAT, and conducted under the auspices of the *Federation Societes Feminities Sportives de France*.³ Following the second games in the series, held at Gothenburg, Sweden in 1926, the *International Amateur Athletic Federation* (IAAF) and the IOC agreed to a five track and field events at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. The events were the high jump, discus throw, 100 metres, 4x100 metres relay and the 800 metres.⁴ The British Women's Amateur Athletic team, in a protest that a full eleven-event program of the First Women's International Championships had been reduced to five, did not participate at Amsterdam.⁵

The twenty-six competitors in the 800 metres race at Stockholm, who came from thirteen countries (and their place in the final), were: Australia - Edith ROBINSON; Austria - J. LAUTERRBACH; Belgium - I. DEGRANDE, J. SEGERS; Canada - Fanny ROSENFELD (5), Jean THOMPSON (4); France - S. GUYET, M. NEVEU; Germany - M. DEHUZA, M. DOLLINCER, E. OSTEREICH, Lina RADKE (1), E. WEWER (8); Holland - W.M.C. DUCHATEAU, A.J. MALLON, A. van NOORT; Italy - G. MARCHINI; Japan - Kinue HITOMI (2); Lithuania - P. RADZIULYTE; Poland - G. KIOLOSOWENA (7), O. TABACKA; Sweden - I.K. GENTZEL (3), E.C. PETTERSSON; USA-D.D. BOECKMANN, F. MACDONALD (6), R.B. WILSON.⁶



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I have done some research about the Australian competitor, Edith ROBINSON. The following vignette provides some insight about her experience with running distance events. ROBINSON comprised Australia's female track and field team. She was selected for the 100 metre sprint event and came third in the semi-final.⁷ During the sea-voyage to Amsterdam, members of the men's track and field team collaborated in entering ROBINSON, unbeknown to her, in the 800 metres, a distance she had never raced before. True to her competitive spirit and sense of occasion, ROBINSON ran but withdrew. When I interviewed her in 1988, she stated, "I went 600 metres and I had to pull out then and I've never run one since".⁸

The final of the 800 metres race brought about speculation and a controversial decision about its future existence in the women's athletic programs at Olympic Games. Numerous journalists wrote their perceptions of the scenes of this race, won by Lina RADKE of Germany, in a new world-record time of 2.16-8, with Kinue HITOMI of Japan second. *The Bulletin*, a weekly periodical in Australia included:

*"After the 800 metres race at the Olympiad knocked out and hysterical females were floundering all over the place. Competition is such events can serve no useful or aesthetic purpose in feminine existence."*⁹

Another press report, from London, England, included such phrases as:

*"The collapse of several women athletes ... apparently suffering from dangerous strain; Miss Thompson ... a pretty Canadian girl, with fair bobbed hair, lay faced downwards, with her head on her arm sobbing... she appeared to be in acute pain as well as suffering from disappointment at her defeat."*¹⁰

A similar report appeared in the *New York Times*, stating that six of the nine runners were "completely exhausted and fell head long on the ground".¹¹

Any distress shown by the silver medallist, Kinue HITOMI of Japan, may be explained by the fact she was primarily a sprinter and, according to researcher Shuko HONMA from Japan, had never run an event of that distance.¹² Two British researchers, Anita TEDDER and Stephanie DANIELS, have revealed that headshot photographs accompanying a sensationalist article by British correspondent Sir Percival PHILIPS under the headline - "Women Athletes Collapse in Fierce Strain of Olympic Race-Sobbing Girls" - were not those of runners in the 800 metres race but of sprinters in the 100 metres.¹³ They also explain that Canadian Jeannie THOMPSON'S "collapse" was largely because of an injury and, after they studied the film footage, they were of the opinion that no other runner fell.

One year later, in July 1929, John TUNIS wrote in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* that sportswomen needed more medical attention than sportsmen:

*"Those who doubt this statement should have stood beside me during the eight-hundred-metre run in the Olympic Games at Amsterdam last summer. 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. I was informed later that the remaining starter fainted in the dressing room shortly afterward."*¹⁴

A different and more positive perspective is provided in this extract from a report of the Games published by German Olympic Committee immediately after the Games:

*"In almost every specific sporting nation there are women whose constitution and somatotyping vary from extreme femininity to the boyish or young men's. There was, therefore, an unmistakable advantage from those nations where physical education for girls and boys differ very little. This boyish type with the obvious advantages in the areas of sprinting and jumping was seen in competitors mainly from the USA and Canada."*¹⁵

Soon after the conclusion of the Amsterdam Games, the *International Amateur Athletic Federation* (IAAF) rejected a proposal by 16 votes to 6 to eliminate all women's track and field events from future Olympic Games.¹⁶ Instead, along with the 800 metres, that body and the IOC removed the long jump, shot put and 200 metres from the women's track and field events programme. In Canada, the *Globe* newspaper reported some of the details of the discussion and outcome:

"Those opposing the retention of the women's events in the Olympics were headed by a country whose women athletes won the present Olympic women's track and field meet in Canada. The Canadian delegates were supported by Great Britain, Ireland, Finland, Hungary and Italy. Australia and South Africa bolted the British Empire's united front and voted for the women's events, as did also the United States, Japan, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Norway, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland.

*The 800 metres event, which was the most hotly contested of all the program, was rejected by a 12-to-9 vote, with one abstention, while the broad jump, shot put and 200m flat also failed to command a majority."*¹⁷

Track and field events for women began to flourish globally following the 1928 Olympic Games.¹⁸ Organisational structures for women developed: in Australia the Women's Amateur Athletic Associations of the states of Queensland and Victoria were formed in April and December 1929, respectively.¹⁹ The *Australian Women's Amateur Athletic Union* (AWAAU) was established in 1932 and this body conducted the first Australian Women's Track and Field Championships in Melbourne in 1933.²⁰

In Berlin in 1930, IOC president, Count BAILLET-LATOUR, suggested to the Olympic Congress that women be permitted to participate only in "aesthetic" events.²¹ Eventually, on a clear understanding that "a vote would be taken separately as to whether women should be admitted in athletics and fencing, the vote for swimming, gymnastics, lawn tennis and skating was passed 26 votes to 1."²² The question of allowing women to compete in athletics was then put and accepted 17 votes to 9, with one abstention. American representative to the Berlin IOC Congress of 1930, Gustavus T. KIRBY, wrote in his report:

"The IAAF at its meeting at the Berlin attended by President Brundage, Hulbert, Ferris, McCabe and Kirby, not only included women on the programme but went so far as to adjourn subject to the call of the chair to the end that it could con-



Kinue Hitomi

*sider whether or not to withdraw from competition in the Games if women were deprived from taking part there."*²³

At the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games there was a three-event limit placed on each female athlete.²⁴ As stipulated by the IAAF, the longest women's race in 1932 and, again at the 1936 Berlin Olympics was the 100 metres.²⁵ Indeed, prior to the 1936 Olympic Games the possibility of eliminating women's track and field events was again the agenda of the IAAF.

Avery BRUNDAGE, who became president of the *United States Amateur Athletic Union* (AAU) in 1928, was against women's participation in track and field events, and after the Los Angeles and Berlin Olympics he became an outspoken ally of the anti-Olympic movement in women's sports.²⁶ There was also much discussion in the Australian press after the 1936 Olympic Games about women's participation in the Olympics.²⁷ However, it is noteworthy that the *New South Wales Women's Amateur Athletic Association* (NSWAAA) introduced the 800 metres event at the 1933 State titles.²⁸ At the first conference of *Australian Women's Amateur Athletic Association* in the same year a proposal to introduce the 800 metres, along with the 400 metres, was put forward. The proposals were defeated.²⁹

As stated earlier, thirty-two years after its introduction in Amsterdam in 1928, the 800 metres event returned to the Olympic program in Rome in 1960. A competitor in that event in Rome, Brenda JONES, was instrumental in the development of distance running for women in Australia. She became a delegate for her Victorian athletic club in order to get the 800 metres included in athletic meets.³⁰ When first introduced, women who competed in the 800 metres event were only allowed to contest in field events as a second event to reduce the possibility of physiological damage. It was not until 1953 that the 800 metres event was introduced into the national championships in Australia.

Following the 1954 British Empire Games (now known as the Commonwealth Games) in Vancouver, Mabel ROBINSON, the Australian women's team manager, unsuccessfully proposed at a Commonwealth meeting to have the 800 metres included at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.³²

Summary, and a concluding plea for help

In the 1920s any distance-running event was considered too strenuous for women. It contradicted and opposed the prevailing ideology of femininity. But questions still remain about whom it was that brought about this prevailing ideology. Clearly, in the sporting field, there were many men and women who were against female participation. Clearly, the print media sought to highlight any debate, which in most cases bordered on the irrational.

It is known that in some countries, and at the Women's World Games, the Women's 800 metres race of this continued despite the IAAF/IOC ban.³⁴ This, specifically, is where I seek help in furthering my knowledge and understanding. I would be grateful if readers of this ISOH article can provide information, or be willing to collaborate, in ascertaining some of the following:

When was the 800 metres event for women introduced in your country (state / province / region) at an organised / constituted level? What was the response in your country (state / province / region) by the organised / constituted track and field / Olympic body to the press reports of the 800 metre race (heats and /or final)?

What was the response in your country (state / province / region) to the "banning" of the 800 metre race for women by the IAAF /IOC?

Did the event continue in your country (state / province / region) despite the decisions of the IAAF and IOC?

If your country was not one of the 13 represented in the event at the 1928 Stockholm

Olympics, why?

Any other comments.

Several sport historians have undertaken considerable research about women at the 1928 Olympics, generally.³⁵ However, as can be ascertained from the above, this research task question is specifically related to an examination and analysis of issues and ramifications of the 800 metres event at the 1928 in specific countries and during the periods of the events banishment for the Olympics (1928-1960). The focus is on the attitudes and perspectives of participating athletes, national (regional, provincial, state) sports governing bodies, and the media. *Quo vadis?*

Notes and References

- 1 Much of the "factual information" in this ISOH article is extracted from the paper presented at the 2004 CESH Conference, which has been submitted for publication in the proceedings.
- 2 JOBLING, Ian, "Australian women at the Olympic Games: swimmers, not runners, 1912-1928", in: *Proceedings of the Sports Science Section, 52nd ANZAAS Congress*, Macquarie University, 1982, p. 86.
- 3 For further information, see LEIGH, Mabel/BONNIN, Therese M., "The pioneering role of Madame Alice Milliat and the FSFI in establishing international track and field competition for women", in: *Journal of Sport History* 4(1977), pp. 72-83.
- 4 SPEARS, Betty, "Women in the Olympic Games: an unresolved problem", in: GRAHAM, Peter J./UEBERHORST, Horst, *The Modern Olympics*, New York 1976, p. 59.
- 5 PARK, Roberta, "American reactions to the 1928 Olympic Games: social, political, and gender considerations", Unpublished Keynote Address, 1989 HISPA Congress, p.17.
- 6 Netherlands Olympic Committee, *The Ninth Olympiad: Official Report of the Olympic Games of 1928 Celebrated at Amsterdam*, Netherlands Olympic Committee, p. 470-471.
- 7 JOBLING, Ian, *Australian*, p. 94.
- 8 GOULD, Nell, *Australian Women's Amateur Athletic Union: History of Women's Athletics*, Sydney 1973, p. 55.
- 9 ROBINSON, Edith, interview with Ian JOBLING, Sydney, June 17, 1988; transcript located in Centre for Olympic Studies, University of Queensland.
- 10 *The Bulletin*, Sydney (August 28, 1928), p. 42.
- 11 *Sun Special*, no date, newspaper cutting located in scrapbook of Edith ROBINSON. Another newspaper cutting included the comment that one specialist had declared, "women are not physically built to undergo the strain of races... Nature made woman to bear children and she cannot rid herself of fat to the extent of necessary physical fitness".
- 12 *New York Times* (August 3, 1928).
- 13 "Shuko Honma, Kinue Hitomi and the development of the Olympic Movement in Japan", Unpublished paper, 2000 Pre-Olympic Scientific Congress, Brisbane, Australia p. 3.
- 14 DANIELS, Stephanie/TEDDER, Anita, *A Proper Spectacle: Women Olympians 1900-1936*, Sydney 2000, pp. 71-73.
- 15 TUNIS, John, « Women and the sport business », in: *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (July 1929), p. 213.
- 16 *Die Olympischen Spiele Amsterdam, 1928*, p. 86 (translated). The article continued:
"The condition of exhaustion of several competitors after the race, which had caused some complaints, was certainly more of a psychological nature. A nervous reaction caused by the excitement of competition for the world championship. It would be regrettable

- if this competition would not appear again in the next Olympic program. As in the case of men, adaptation and preparation will exclude those images of exhaustion."
- 16 *Sydney Morning Herald* (August 9, 1928).
 - 17 *The Globe*, Toronto (August 8, 1928), p. 6.
 - 18 JOBLING, Ian/BARHAM, Pamela, Early development of women in Australian sport: socio-historical issues, *Netball Australia: A Socio-Historical Analysis*, St. Lucia 1988, pp. 13-19.
 - 19 GOULD, *Australian*, p. 4. The Women's Amateur Athletic Associations of other States of Australia were formed as follows: Western Australia (South Australia 1931; New South Wales 1932; Western Australia 1936; and Tasmania 1937).
 - 20 The programme was 100 yards, 220 yards, 880 yards walk, high jump, broad jump, shot put, discus throw and javelin throw and 90 yards hurdles. There was no 800 yards or metres event; the longest event (880 yards) was a walk.
 - 21 Selected Papers, 1930 Berlin IOC Congress folder, Avery Brundage Collection Box 75; DYER, Ken E, *Challenging the Men: The Social Biology of Female Sporting Achievement*, St. Lucia 1982, p. 123.
 - 22 Joint Report of Delegates representing the Olympic Associations of Great Britain, New Zealand, and South Africa, Berlin IOC Congress 1930 Folder, Brundage Collection Box 75.
 - 23 Gustavus T. KIRBY'S report of the Congress, p. 4, Berlin IOC Congress 1930 Folder, Brundage Collection Box 75.
 - 24 HULT, Joan, 'American sportswomen: go for the gold 1912-1936', in: MULLER, Norbert/RUHL, Joachim (eds.), *Olympic Scientific Congress: Sport History*, 1984, p. 36.
 - 25 EMERY, Lyn, 'An examination of the 1928 Olympic 800 meter race for women', Unpublished paper presented to the Thirteenth Annual Convention of North American Society for Sport History, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, 1985, p. 11.
 - 26 HULT, "American", p. 37.
 - 27 The front page headline of a weekly sporting periodical read "Should women take part in Olympics - views of experts differ on this subject", *Sporting Globe* (August 19, 1936), p. 1.
 - 28 *Sydney Morning Herald* (January 30, 1933), p. 15.
 - 29 Gould: *Australian*, p. 7. The proposal also included other events such as the 400 m and the 2-mile cross-country race; the proposal was defeated.
 - 30 The proposal was defeated. Interview conducted with Brenda JONES, 1998.
 - 31 DALY, John, *Ours Were the Hearts to Dare*, published by the author, Adelaide 1982.
 - 32 JONES, Interview.
 - 33 The attitudes of the 1920s and 1930s were that track and field was not a "lady-like" sport and many men and women believed that women should not be track athletes. See A.J. "Sandy" YOUNG, *Sport for women in the 1920s and 1930s*, Nova Scotia Sports Heritage Centre, 1982, p. 15; JOBLING/BARHAM, *Early*, pp. 13-19.
 - 34 For example, MARCHINI of Italy was a competitor in the 800 metres in Amsterdam; from preliminary research it would appear that the event continued at Italian national track and field championships throughout the 1930s. [Personal correspondence with Sarah MORGAN, November 2004]
 - 35 Many of the researchers are cited in references in previous sections of this article.



Officials at the 1928 Olympic Games; first left: Alice Milliat