

8-16-1996

The "Women's Olympics"

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Other History Commons](#), [Sports Management Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)
Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Public History at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in On Sport and Society by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The "Women's Olympics"" (1996). *On Sport and Society*. 256.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/256>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
August 16, 1996

It was being touted as the Women's Olympics even before it started. As the games proceeded and especially as the U.S. Women turned in excellent performances the claim that this was the Year of the Woman at the Olympics was re-enforced. But what did that mean?

Commentators cited the performance of the U.S. women as evidence of the impact of Title IX. They talked about how the image of the female athlete had changed. How women are competing as children and adolescents in larger numbers than ever before, and in all kinds of sports, not just those that had been traditionally acceptable for women. Others talked about how women in African countries came of age in this Olympics. In fact women worldwide seem to be competing athletically in societies where previously competitive sport had been taboo for women.

For those who viewed the Olympics largely through the prism of the NBC television coverage, the year of the woman had a very different meaning. Dick Ebersol's feminization of the Olympics was not exactly the result of Title IX or the result of any great advance in social attitudes toward women and sport. In fact the Ebersol-NBC Olympics, seemed to be driven by many of the traditional visions of women and sport.

Prior to the games NBC spent countless hours in market research trying to determine what version of the Olympics women wanted to see, and then did their best to provide it. Ebersol told David Remnick of The New Yorker that NBC's ratings success was achieved by bringing a feminine sensibility to the games. Empathy with the athlete and their struggles, both on and off the field of competition, caused women to flock to television coverage.

It was really a simple matter confirmed by ten thousand NBC marketing surveys. Men come to sport "from the outside in" while women come "from the inside out." Men view the event and then might make a connection to the athletes, while women must connect to the athlete before they have an interest in the event. For women the story is the thing, while winning and losing are secondary concerns.

David Remnick suggests that as a result NBC took a soap opera approach to its presentation of the games creating a "seventeen-day-long, multi-character, open-ended narrative." In doing so

they created a television show of enormous appeal to women, or so say the ratings.

Somehow I don't think that this is what people were talking about when they spoke about the Year of the Woman in the Olympics.

In developing their feminine Olympics NBC decided that women's team sport was of little interest. While 65,000 people, some of whom were women, jammed into Sanford Stadium in Athens to watch the U.S. Women win the soccer gold medal, NBC provided thirty seconds of highlights. While the U.S. women played before packed houses in Columbus at the softball venue, NBC offered a few minutes of highlights. Even the U.S. women's basketball team failed to get much notice from those sensitive to the sensibilities of women. General Mills followed the NBC lead when they ignored women from team sports for the Wheaties box.

To see the U.S. women marching to gold medals in three team sports, and to watch NBC ignore them, was an astounding sight and one that women and men will not soon forget. To see superb performances by unknown women from around the world, is indicative of a tremendous growth of women's sport worldwide. Instead what NBC presented was hour upon hour of swimming and gymnastics, two traditional women's sports displaying women in swimsuits and little women in tights.

Then there was the Michael Johnson story. His great achievement in doubling in the 400 and 200-meter events was worthy of the coverage it got. But did you notice that Marie-Jose Perec of France did the same thing in the women's 400 and 200. Was this a less significant achievement than Michael Johnson's? What did NBC's market research indicate about feminine interest in this achievement? Was it a lesser achievement in the eyes of NBC because Perec is French or because Perec is a woman?

So who is right in their reading of the Atlanta games as the year of the Woman in the Olympics? Although television ratings and market research may tell us one thing, I suspect that event results and the large crowds that were attracted to women's venues tell us something quite different.

There is a market for and interest in women's sport, including women's team sport and women athletes over four-foot six-inches tall. In the future it will include your daughters and granddaughters.

And that is the significance of these Olympics; an excellent story line--better even than a soap opera.

Copyright 1996 by Richard C. Crepeau