

# The emergence of women's sport

**Luke Harris** explores the factors affecting the emergence of female performers in football, tennis and athletics



The latter part of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century have seen a dramatic change in the landscape for elite women's sport. Although there is still widespread discrimination and belittling of women's sport, women are closer than ever to equality within the sporting arena, although this is still a long way off.

The key factors affecting the transformation have come about through the changing place of women in society, the impact of media and sponsorship, and the dispelling of long-held myths about women's bodies and their physiological capabilities.

It could be argued that sexual discrimination in sport is virtually taken for granted. Almost every sport is separated on gender lines and the consequence of this has been the marginalisation and exclusion of women in sport, both at elite and grassroots levels. Codified modern sport was established in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period in history when women had virtually no rights in society (such as the right to vote in elections) and existed in 'separate spheres' to men. The place of women in society at that time is perhaps the key reason why women were excluded from competing in sport, while the

evolving place of women within society since then is an important contributory factor in its modern emergence.

## Athletics

Another significant contributory factor behind women's exclusion from early modern sport were scientific claims, centring around the belief that strenuous physical

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5,057 women competed in the 2016 Rio Olympics

exercise could do harm to women and their ability to bear children.

This was certainly the case at the Olympic Games, which totally excluded women from the inaugural Games in 1896. This decision was based on the subservient position of women in society, but also to the views of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) founder, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who regarded athletics for women as 'against the laws of nature'. Such a position had not changed in 1935, when he remarked that women's primary role at the Games 'should be like the ancient tournaments — the crowning of victors with the laurels'. This was a chauvinistic attitude, but a prevalent one at this time among the elite that administered and controlled sport.

Despite de Coubertin's opinion, women were allowed to compete in a limited number of sports at the second Olympic Games, held in 1900. This came in sports seen not to be strenuous or damaging to women's modesty, such as tennis, golf and archery, and it was not until the 1912 Olympics that women were permitted to enter swimming events.

Another 16 years would pass before women were allowed to compete in athletics. Until the 1960 Olympics, the furthest distance women were allowed to run was 800 metres. This was based on fears about the strain distance running might have on a woman's body. Beginning in 1960, more long-distance events were included for women, although it was not until 1984 that the first women's Olympic marathon took place, an event which brought equality in

terms of the number of events for men and women in Olympic athletics.

At the 2016 Rio Olympics, 5,057 women competed, 45% of those who participated, the highest percentage in the 120-year history of the Olympic Games. The rise in female competitors is partly due to the equality now present in sports such as boxing, where women competed for the first time at the 2012 Olympics, but also to the stance taken by the IOC that no country may exclude women from competing. At London 2012 Brunei, Saudi Arabia and Qatar sent female athletes to compete for the first time. Sarah Attar became the first female Saudi Olympian when she ran in the 800 metres.

### British athletics

In Britain, the development of elite women's athletics owes much to the funding provided by the National Lottery. The World Class funding programme was introduced in 1997, 3 years after the launch of the lottery, and allowed both male and female athletes to receive funding to train full time. This came as a consequence of Britain's declining Olympic performance, leading to just one gold medal and 36th position on the medals table at the 1996 Olympics, but also because of the total removal of amateurism from the Olympic charter in the 1980s.

Although funding has helped British athletes of both sexes, its impact has been greater for female athletes, who had typically struggled to find the sponsorship that would allow them to train full time. In track-and-field athletics, the funding has seen Britain

produce far more female athletic champions than ever before — such as Denise Lewis, Christine Ohuruogu and Jessica Ennis — and allowed for success in others sports, such as rowing, which won its first-ever gold medal in a women's event at London 2012.

### Football

Advances in the understanding of the human body have certainly helped the development of women's football. Football had become a popular activity for women during the First World War, principally among young women who worked in factories for the war effort. Despite its popularity with players and supporters — who flocked to matches in large numbers — the Football Association (FA) banned women from competing because of fears of the suitability of the game for women, a move which crippled the sport's development.

This ban continued until 1971, when fervour created by the victory of England's men in the 1966 World Cup led to the creation of the Women's Football Association. There was also pressure from UEFA to remove the ban. In 1993 the FA took over the governance of the women's game and in the twenty-first century its promotion has been a high priority.

### Media impact

The impact of television and commercialisation should not be ignored. Dedicated 24-hours-a-day sports channels have increased the demand for televised sports from both sexes, increasing financial revenue and public exposure. In 2010 the FA established the Women's Super League, an elite competition for English women's football, made possible through a television deal with broadcaster ESPN. Since its establishment, the coverage of this league has grown. For the 2017/18 season, both BT Sport and the BBC broadcast live matches.

Success in international tournaments has also aided the emergence of women's football in Britain. The performance of the first ever British Olympic team in the London 2012 Olympics, which reached the quarter finals and played in front of a record crowd of 70,000 for the match against Brazil at Wembley, did much to push the sport into the public consciousness. This was followed



by a third-place finish by the England team at the 2015 World Cup, a tournament broadcast live on the BBC. The consequence was greater interest in the game, with Channel 4 winning the rights for the 2017 European Championships, supported by a big-budget national advertising campaign.

However, despite the coverage of this tournament and all England women's internationals on the BBC, only 7% of all sport shown on British television is women's sport.

The money in the men's game in English football has undoubtedly had an impact on the emergence and development of elite women's football. Currently, both divisions of the Women's Super League consist of full- and part-time players, although the hope is that from the 2018 season all players in the top division will be professional. The consequence of this will be that only the elite clubs of English football will be able to compete, as broadcasting, sponsorship and match-day revenue will not cover the total expenditure required.

The moving of the elite men's clubs into the women's game has already been seen. Manchester City was admitted into the Women's Super League top division at the expense of Doncaster Rovers Belles — a lower league club in the men's game, but a women's club with pedigree, having won the women's FA Cup on six occasions and been runners up a further seven times. Despite the negatives of this, the number of elite clubs and moves by the FA have created more and better-paid professional female footballers than ever before.

## Tennis

The development of women's tennis is different from that of both football and athletics, owing to its lower physicality and its popularity with the middle classes during its establishment in the late nineteenth century. In Victorian Britain, rather than being viewed as a deeply physical activity, tennis was viewed as a game that women could play while keeping their modesty, i.e. still being able to wear long dresses. The game was also typically played either in private clubs or on the lawns of large country houses, allowing women to enjoy the game away from the public. This

enabled acceptance of women's tennis by the influential All-England Lawn Tennis Club, which first held a ladies' singles tournament at Wimbledon in 1884.

Despite its comparatively early establishment when compared to athletics and football, the status of women's tennis in



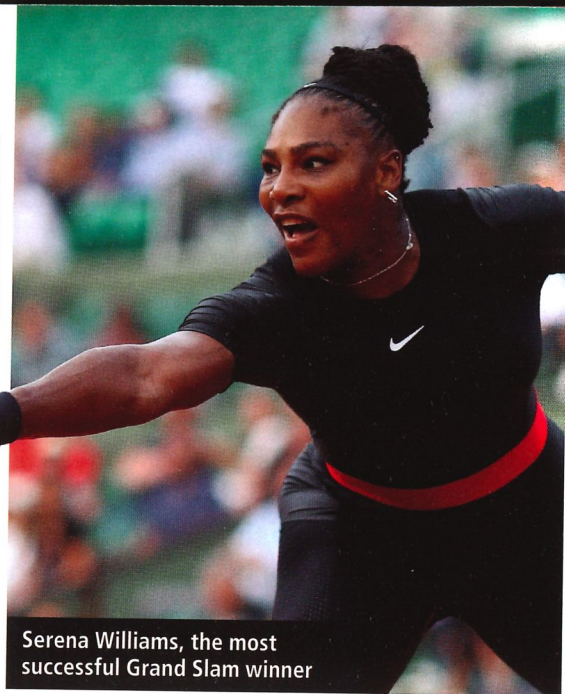
the twenty-first century owes much to the establishment of the Women's Tennis Association in 1973. This association, founded by prominent player Billie Jean King, established a year-round global circuit for female players, which generated revenue from broadcasters and corporate sponsors.

## Growing exposure

The initial investment allowed the tour to grow. As it received more media, the tour became sought after by corporations, resulting in increased sponsorship. This is a spiral that can be seen in other women's sports, such as football, but also cricket, as exclusive television coverage of both the women's and men's England team with Sky Sports allowed the women's team to become fully professional. This increased the team's performance and success, leading to greater exposure and more investment. This was demonstrated by the 2017 Women's Cricket World Cup, hosted and won by England, with a record crowd of 25,000 present for the final and millions more watching on television around the globe.

The investment in women's tennis in the 1970s and 1980s allowed its players to become extremely wealthy. In 1982, top-ranked player Martina Navratilova became the first ever female player to earn over \$1 million in a calendar year, an amount that she doubled 2 years later, owing to her success and the increasing prize money on offer. In the decades since, the spiral of exposure and investment in the sport has further increased.

Serena Williams, the most successful player in history in terms of Grand Slam victories, has career earnings in excess of \$84 million. These earnings have also been possible because of the equality in prize money that now exists between men and



**Serena Williams, the most successful Grand Slam winner**

women at all four Grand Slam tournaments, since Wimbledon became the last to award equal prize money in 2007. In 2017, the winners of both the men's and women's tournaments took home £2.2 million each.

The exposure that women's sport has received at the elite level is one of the factors that has helped the sport grow at grassroots levels. Players such as Serena Williams are positive role models for people across the world of both sexes, and so the growth and evolution of the sport will continue.

## Conclusion

The outlook for women's sport in the twenty-first century is very different from 50 years ago. The emergence of women's sport has been aided by the changing place of women in society, and also by commercialisation and globalisation through revenue brought in from broadcasters and sponsors.

Despite the emergence of great female athletes, women's sport does not enjoy parity with men's sport. Excluding Serena Williams, all of the top-earning athletes in the world are men, and her annual earnings or those of any other female athlete in the world do not come near the top male earners. Statistics from the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation indicate that only 5% of total sports coverage is of female sport. There is still a long way to go.

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