



# W

## oman and sport

EDITORIAL

## (or Woman is sport?)

Every year has been important for the EWF Scientific Magazine, but 2019 is set to be an exceptionally important one, as we will try to draw attention, with an approach that we hope will appeal to many willing readers and interested experts, to a theme that “is not new but it is always new” and that is personally very close to my heart. Close to my heart for several reasons, which I will try to explain here. The main theme will be: women and sport. One of the major reasons is that my first federal position, at the beginning of the '90s, was training the women's national team - an experience which truly gave me an insight into the female sports world and that allowed me to open important windows on many personal and group dynamics, and most certainly also on “something” about the way to approach female training. I emphasise “something”, because if I think back on those times, in light of the experience accumulated in the years that have followed, I must admit (with no ifs and buts) that I wouldn't have made some of the choices I made back then and, other choices which I should have made, I would have carried through with determination.

In those years, in that cultural climate, we had practically no experience of how to train strength in women, since the methods used were often those implemented with men, even with the same volume and intensity. The belief and experience at the time was that training like men was the best way for a woman to train.

The experience that circulated often originated (and was more or less imported) from the world of track and field, where women had been practising resistance training for some time to improve performance in their throws. The first women's European Championships held in San Marino in 1988, where Italy took its first gold thanks to Roberta Sforza in the women's 48 kg category, had as protagonists athletes from throwing sports, in particular from the former USSR, where female resistance training was already part of their workouts. Obviously - and how could one deny it? - the problems at the time were not only of a methodological nature, they were also cultural. You had to overcome the resistance, not only of the general public, but sometimes also of people involved, so that women could safe-

ly and freely do weightlifting, using heavy loads to develop their skills and be truly competitive. They were indeed difficult times, and they prevented the growth (in cultural terms, as previously mentioned) of people in the weightlifting world and those in general, concerning the subject of women in society and, therefore, also in sport. In Italy, we all know very well that new approaches are treated with diffidence, as are sudden or rapid changes.

Today, women's weightlifting is - fortunately - a well-established, legitimated, recognised reality, appreciated as much as men's, in fact, highly appreciated: which is a very good thing, but let's not forget that it was not easy to get to this situation. Far from it!

In truth, all female sport has had to suffer and sweat to establish itself and demonstrate that the old and unproven conjectures on gender difference (and on everything that this meant and incorporated in cultural terms) had little to do with practice and results. Women have actually given sport more than sport has given them.

Mass sport, as we know, is a fairly recent phenomenon. It was born with

the social reorganisation that followed the industrial revolution at the end of the 19th century in England. The industrial revolution, which inevitably became a cultural revolution, of customs and of an overall vision of reality, sparked intense migration from the countryside to industrial cities and, with the start of shift work for the masses (almost all male), free time became available during the day, a concept that was inconceivable to farmers, who worked from dawn to dusk. For this precise reason, sport, previously only a privilege of the well-off who had the free time to practice it, now became a hobby of other social categories and over time, a practice recognised by many. Women's sport, however, was still unheard of!

Women do not even figure when the Olympics came into being. It was the same Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) who affirmed that the women should be spectators, appreciating the men's sporting feats (spectators not participants); he also added, "Female participation would be impractical, uninteresting, anti-aesthetic and improper" (1912). The idea of women's sport was inconceivable, even in the Olympics of the early 1900s. We had to wait until the Antwerp Olympics in 1920 to witness the official entrance on the international scene female athletes and the admission of the same into Olympic sport. Although already in Paris (home to the second edition of the modern Olympic Games in 1900), in addition to six hundred male athletes, two female tennis players had performed. The true consecration of women in sport, however, took place in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin (XI Olympics, from 1 to 16 August). Forty-nine countries participated with a total of 3,834 athletes, of which only 328 women, about 10%. Italy's Ondina Valla won the first gold medal in the 80-metre hurdles.

With every Olympics that passed, every four years, female sport established itself more and more, distorting rigid beliefs, anachronistic dying traditions and even granite bureau-

cracies. I remember the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, when the President at the time, Jacques Rogge, together with his executive board, decided (a decision made in 2006) that female ski jumpers would not be competing in that edition of the Games, based on technical merit. The Canadian athletes turned to the Canadian Human Rights Board, accusing the IOC of (clearly, quite evident) discrimination. Despite the factual data, the determination of the petitioners and various uncertainties, the situation has still not been clarified. In 2000, women's weightlifting was already part of the Games in Seoul, as it was in 2012; in Salt Lake City (USA) in 2002, female athletes took part in the first bobsleigh competition, and yet another wall officially fell in 2012 when female boxing made its official entrance in the London Olympic Games. What was the main resistance in the social sphere that contrasted the development of women's sport? Why is there still male predominance today? The first negative approaches, which greatly hindered and undermined the sport of women, underlined the (very obvious) differences between the two sexes: men are muscular and competitive, women weaker and more submissive. And that was it, end of story, without any in-depth analysis and with a certain peremptory tone to it. Obviously a line of thought, not only wrong, but extremely wrong and unfortunately in vogue until the world of feminism as a whole did not begin to structure new concepts and a new paradigm regarding the female body. The relationship between sexes and gender began to be treated differently, and finally, in the 1980s gender was defined not as a cultural aspect of a biological representation, but as the experience of a body that can express two sexes. According to Julia Epstein & Kristina Straub (1991), with this line of thought the biological foundation is only apparently obvious and well defined: the gender of bodies is an unstable cultural construction, whose purpose is to limit and contain the

menacing absence of confines between the bodies and the practices of the body that would otherwise explode the institutional and organizational structures of social ideologies. This obviously calls into question the clear distinction between two sexes as differentiated units. The passage is subtle but decisive.

This approach changed the vision of the woman and her body within the sports system. We have come a long way from those years, even if men are more culturally facilitated when it comes to accessing sport, through authentic rites of passage, in some cases obliged, while this is not the case - generally and in our culture at least - for the female universe. But is this only the reason why female numbers are lower in terms of participation in sport? This is certainly one reason. The other may lie in the fact that the percentage of women who abandon sport is very high. Numerous authoritative studies have shown that about 40% of women interrupt competitive activity prematurely and abruptly. The age group most at risk is between 15 and 17 years. Having said that, further investigation should be made into these figures in order to discern the various sectors and the different reasons:

- for motivational aspects;
- coaches are not skilled in training female athletes;
- an obsolete sports organisation;
- bringing forward competitive objectives.

The list could be much much longer! Hence the choice to dedicate our magazine this year to women, to try to provide as many explanations as possible to these and other aspects of women's sport and training, because "female sport" with a greater number of participants and the right visions, broadens the cultural landscape of a nation and brings joy and passion (which would do us all some good) to the entire sports movement.

**Antonio Urso**  
**EFW President**