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Women in Weapon Land:
The Rise of International Women's Fencing

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Abstract:

The world of weapons has always been male dominated both on the battlefield and in sport. Competitive fencing, born as mimicry of duels, developed throughout the 20th Century as a symbol of masculinity, an embodiment of the notion of manhood and an expression of men's virility. Surprisingly however, female fencing was accepted into the Olympic programme in Paris in 1924, before many other sports, as a result of an ambiguity in the regulations of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Fencing Federation (FIE). The full integration of female fencing took much longer according to the diverse weapons used in the competitions. Although the individual foil event appeared in 1924, the team foil event was not recognised until 1960 and the other weapons even later. The female sword became an Olympic event only in 1996, the female sabre in 2004, after long discussions both within the FIE and between the FIE and the IOC.

The different stages of the recognition of female fencers by the sporting institutions are the focus of this paper. The analysis of the process, based on the archives of the FIE as well as on the specialized press, reveals the influence of three successive time contexts: the 1920s, the 1960s, and the 1990s. The long resistance of the male fencing community to any challenge of the gender order has also been relevant. It is finally argued that, despite the explicit defense of women's sport by the leading sport institutions, women were still until recently the victims of the lengthy negotiations between the IOC and the FIE.

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From duels to battles, the world of weapons has always been male dominated, and the world of sport is no exception.[1] Competitive fencing was born out of the practice of duelling and developed throughout the 20th Century, not only as a symbol of masculinity through its embodiment of a particular notion of manhood and male honour,[2] but also as an expression of masculine virility. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that all three fencing weapons rapidly became part of the Olympic Games for men; as early as 1896 for individual events and then in 1906 for team events. As for world championships, the programme of events was finalised a mere dozen years after the competition had been set up: epee, sabre and foil were included in the programme in 1921, 1922 and 1926 respectively for individual events and between 1929 and 1931 into team events.

Epee and sabre fencing were attached to the instrumental mastery of the art of killing or injuring in societies at war and in military institutions, as well as in civilian society through duelling. By contrast foil fencing was historically used in duels and it arrived a little later than the other two forms. From the 16th and 17th centuries onwards, the three weapons continued to develop like dancing within *academies*, using various technical models depending upon the national cultures in which they grew.[3] As a result, they became symbolically attached to France in the case of the foil, Italy the epee and Hungary the sabre. Such a pattern was based on both objective technical elements and stereotypes. Foils were the weapons used to learn how to fence. They were light, flexible and easy to handle, as well as favouring precision and counter-attacks, and had to observe special conventions that differentiated between the fencer who could attack and the one who did not have 'priority'. Epees had a heavier and longer blade, making the performance more closely linked to power and speediness. Finally, the sabre allowed both the edge and the tip of the blade to be used. They were traditionally associated with the cavalry, where assaults were quick and needed excellent techniques.

This brief statement aids understanding of both the nature and the differences between the three weapons for women. Female fencing was socially more acceptable if it fitted the stereotypes associated with femininity. Conversely, it provoked greater institutional resistance when it challenged the gender order. By their technical characteristics and connotations, foils were more in keeping with standards of acceptability for women than epees, which were in turn considered more appropriate for women than sabres.

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Olympic Female Foil Fencing: Puzzling Result of Dissension during the Roaring 1920s

Despite its masculine legacy and war connotations, the sport of fencing at the beginning of the 20th Century was practised by a small number of women in those countries where the activity enjoyed a well-anchored tradition and where, simultaneously, female sports were developing as areas of resistance to male dominion, particularly in England, Denmark, France and the Netherlands. Denmark, for instance, organised national championships from 1915 until 1918, albeit for foil fencing only. Major figures of post-war female fencing made their appearance here, including future 1924 Olympic champion Osiier-Ellen Ottillia. However, competitions remained infrequent at national level and almost non-existent at international level. Neither the recently created FIE nor the IOC was willing to put the issue on the agenda at this time.[4] Neither institution, widely under French influence, was ready to make any concessions on the subject.[5]

The development of female fencing was also obviously linked to economic considerations. In France, for instance, the pro-female propaganda which appeared in the columns of the magazine *l'Escrime et le Tir* after the Great War referred, at first, to the difficulties of fencing clubs and fencing masters who were faced with declining clientele. The number of special courses for ladies and women fencing masters rose consequently, with women representing a new reservoir of potential members and a potential market that many masters could no longer ignore. Competitions between women were not long in following. A number of them were organised within the framework of the women's multi-sports club *Académia* and opened the way to the first international foil fencing competition for ladies held in June 1921. The event was organised with the patronage of the *Fédération Nationale d'Escrime* (National Fencing Federation[FNE]) during the *Grandes semaines des Armes* (Grand Weapons' Weeks), with European (men's) championships being held in parallel. French, English, Danish and German women competed and witnessed the victory of Uta Barding, the "strong and scientific Danish fencer", to the sound of the Toselli Serenade. Osiier-Ellen Ottillia was also rewarded for the aesthetic quality of her techniques. In the small world of Parisian fencing, however, the fact that women had been granted the right to compete did not mean that they also had the right to give up their femininity.

Tournaments were staged in Paris, Ostend, London… and a number of the sport's leaders even believed that European championships would shortly follow. Not everyone, however, was convinced of the idea. In France, even the strongest defenders of women's fencing, including the young fencing master Albert Lacaze, perceived it all as a way to develop the beauty of the female body and the aesthetics of walking techniques, as well as harmony in general body attitudes, rather than a serious intention to invite women to enjoy the pleasure of competing and fighting. According to the dominant discourse on women's physical exercise in the early 1920s,[6] female fencers were asked to move "nicely rather than strongly and not to sacrifice everything in order to fulfil the desire of touching the opponent" .[7] On the other hand, England and Denmark favoured a more militant stance which was less narrowly linked to the hackneyed stereotypes of femininity. English and Danish women remained avant-garde by encouraging female fencers to reach technical excellence and compete. The fact that the first official proposal to include a fencing event for ladies in the 1924 Olympics was put forward by Denmark, through the voice of Julie Simonsen in 1921, came therefore as no surprise.[8]

As a result of ongoing discussions among IOC members on the necessity to avoid increasing the number of events within the Olympic Games, the FIE chose not to forward the demand, officially so as not to receive a potentially negative answer from the Olympic authorities. The defenders of the feminine cause refused to admit defeat and put forward a further application during the FIE Congress of the following year. The insistence of both English and Danish delegates forced the FIE General Secretary, Frenchman René Lacroix, to acknowledge that the argument given a year earlier as justification for refusing Julie Simonsen's request was not valid, since IOC members had omitted to mention explicitly that it resulted from their refusal to increase the number of events in the 1922 Olympic Programme. On this occasion, the French IOC delegate, the Marquis of Chasseloup-Laubat, who was also Vice President of the FIE, was able to gain agreement that the question of women fencers would be discussed during a meeting of the FIE at a later date.[9] In reality, the IOC took little risk with this decision since the stance taken by the leaders of international sport federations was generally rather traditionalist. Furthermore, in doing so, the IOC also appeared to leave the responsibility of refusing to include female fencing in the hands of the FIE.

However, the situation gave rise to fierce debate within the fencing community. The FIE Congress in 1922 reflected a clear division. For some leaders, the institutional recognition of female foil fencing had arrived too early since only a few exceptional participants were able to fence at a high level. In their opinion, organising competitions in such conditions would be counter-productive for the sport. For others, on the contrary, the quantity and quality of many female fencers gave them the right to compete at an international level. The latter argument finally won, thanks to the convincing example of Britain and Denmark. With 39 votes against 22, the FIE adopted the principle of a competition for ladies at the VIIIth Olympiad, in the form of an individual foil event.

The IOC was taken aback by the decision and found itself forced to become part of a movement it had not desired. In 1923, Franz Reichel, who was in charge of organising the Paris Olympics,[10] informed René Lacroix that the ratification of this decision could only become effective after the Prague Congress in 1925, i.e. only for the Olympic Games of 1928. Yet, who was to decide? Should it be the International Fencing Federation or the International Olympic Committee? Difficult discussions were then held. René Lacroix was not initially inclined to fight and, in the Annual Report of 1922, merely confirmed the decision taken by the IOC. The English delegate Seligman reacted immediately. No! The FIE had voted and the General Secretary had, therefore, no choice but to make sure the IOC included a ladies event. René Lacroix returned to battle with Olympic delegates and, this time round, was successful. Between 2nd and 4th July 1924, the *Vélodrome d'Hiver* of Paris opened its door to 25 competitors from nine nations, who came to compete in the first Olympic foil fencing event for females. Danes (1st, 3rd and 5th place) and Englishwomen (2nd and 4th place) largely dominated the competition. The French organisers were more than satisfied with the results. Indeed, behind every Olympic medallist, there was a French fencing master! Furthermore, in Paris, fencers had managed to escape criticism. Although the technical level of the competitors was considered low, their outfit was, on the other hand, beyond reproach, thanks to both the work of the Clothing Committee of the French Olympic Committee and the decision to make skirts compulsory.[11]

The Olympic Games of 1924 were an important step towards the recognition of female fencers.[12] With the setting-up of a new foil fencing event and the increase in the number of women participating (177 against 66 in Antwerp), these Games confirmed the decline of

Coubertin's influence within the Olympic Administration, as well as the growing interest of international federations in female sport.[13]

Controversial European Championships

There was still some way to go, however, and the situation remained difficult for women, until 1932 at least. The integration of women's fencing had been the result of 'dissension' between the IOC and FIE and, for this reason, women's participation was questioned each and every time that sports leaders discussed the possibility of reducing the number of events in the Olympic Programme. In 1925, the FIE resisted the pressure being exerted on it and chose to modify the rules and competition format, rather than completely remove the women's event and this was upheld for the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam. There, the performance of German Olympic champion Hélène Mayer was enthusiastically welcomed by experienced spectators. The French female competitors on the other hand, were the focus of criticism: "French fencing masters give young girls and ladies lessons which are just as serious as those given to their brothers, cousins or husbands! And introduce them to the public only when they no longer look like awkward children with weapons".[14] Perception of female fencers was further affected by the scandal surrounding the 800 metres in the same Olympics, during which one of the runners fell at the end of the race. In spite of this however, the FIE decided, in a meeting organised during the Amsterdam Olympic Games, to accept an idea launched by the organiser of the Games, German Van Rossen, i.e. to organise ladies' European championships the following year based on the model of the male championships.[15] This competition, which was actually more of a world championship at a time when fencing was totally dominated by Europeans, was staged for the first time on 15th April, 1929, by one of the leading fencing nations, Italy, in the city of Naples.

This first initiative found itself facing a great deal of criticism. The ladies event was mercilessly and unanimously condemned by both the Italian and French press, as well as by the new FIE President, Swiss Eugène Empyeta, during the farewell dinner.[16] Except for the German Hélène Mayer, who was referred to as 'the best of all'[17] and Dutch woman Johanna de Boer, who was acknowledged as 'knowing the art of foil fencing', the performance level of all the other fencers was considered to be very low. These comments

affected the legitimacy of female fencing during the International Congress of April, 1929, when surprisingly, the delegate of the German Fencing Federation, Van Rossen, regretted that the experience in Naples had been counter-productive for international fencing on account of the poor quality of the women's performances: "I shall henceforth be of the opinion that the International Federation should not hold European championships for ladies", he concluded.[18] The English delegates stood firm and took offence. For them, the low level of female fencers could be explained by the fact that both judges and organisers failed to take them seriously. "I can guarantee that if you came to London to see our English *fleurettistes*, you would be amazed and would think twice before fencing against them".[19] Other delegates were quick to agree, but remained nonetheless aware of the lack of homogeneity among competitors. A number of them however, expressed a further concern regarding potential concurrence between sexes. Thus, when the English delegate said in Amsterdam that "women were as strong as men",[20] French delegate René Lacroix immediately commented that:

> Female fencing is of importance, and because it is of importance we must not let people think that it is the same as male fencing. People must not be led to think that ladies can be more or less strong in epee or foil fencing just because ladies have begun competing like men in certain countries. It is totally different."[21]

From then on, René Lacroix considered that the ladies event could only be held if the country hosting it was not the same as the one in charge of the male championships. Female fencing and male fencing were "two absolutely different things"; they must then be clearly differentiated, whatever the value of fencing for women."[22]

FIE President Swiss Eugène Empeyta confirmed this position. For him, it would not go against the interests of female fencing to maintain a separate championship that was as important as the men's. The appropriateness of the format adopted for the championship was even discussed. Why not go back to the previous event format, as organised by the Société *d'Encouragement à l'Escrime* (society dedicated to the promotion of fencing) in Paris, where all high-level fencers remaining in the competition automatically received a medal and a certificate? However, as the English delegate pointed out quite sensibly, such a format would mean totally denying the very principle of the competition, which was to become a champion,

"We already have female Olympic champions, we also have one female European champion. If today you go one step back, you will greatly harm our sport".[23]

The Congress finally voted to continue the ladies event, but decided that the country chosen as the location for the next European championships could decline the offer to stage the ladies championships in favour of another country. "And if no other country appears, the female championships will not take place".[24] Women became dependent upon the goodwill of host countries.

Further criticism focused on the 'inappropriate dress' of a great number of female fencers. Some of the competitors wore skirts that were too short, while others did not wear one at all, preferring trousers. Yet, since February 1928, a number of women had been complaining about the Clothing Committee, claiming that the skirts they had to wear were uncomfortable, unsightly and dangerous. All to no avail however. Armand Massard, whose nickname was 'guardian of underwear', was supported by congress members and stood firm, "for the good image of female fencing and of the fencers themselves, such issues as these should not occur any more".[25] The Hungarian delegate tried to defend the women's cause, but congress members refused to discuss the matter, in support of their President, who promptly closed the discussion: "Female issues should not cause us to lose time. We have rules; it is necessary to apply them. (…) Since we decided to uphold European championships for ladies, we have expressed the wish and shall require that women's dress code be strictly observed in the future, in order that it may not be criticised".[26] Sportswear was a symbol in the debate on sportswomen, and fencing reflected its importance.[27]

Rejection of Female Epee Fencing and Integration of Team Foil Events: the Hesitations of the 1930s

In 1929, female fencing reappeared on the agenda of the FIE at the request of Swiss delegate Dr Mende, who had previously initiated epee events for women in his country. He suggested holding similar competitions at international level, with the support of the FIE. People were astonished by the proposal since the President had already forewarned Dr Mende of the risk of his proposal being refused, while taking care to add that "refusal would not mean dishonour for our [Swiss] federation".[28] For Dr Mende, however, epees were no more

the weapon used in former duels. They were neither heavy nor rigid and, in addition, their widespread use among women was presented as a potentially interesting way to develop the activity of fencing clubs. Far from any ethical or political arguments related to gender equity, justifications were laden with the supposed fragility and weakness of women, together with the need for men to protect them. Epees, for instance, were said to be more accessible for women in that learning how to use them took less time and was less demanding than for foils. Furthermore, potential dangers associated with their use could easily be reduced with the use of certain kinds of sword tips. Finally, "there is no reason for women not to use an epee".[29]

Dr Mende's proposal however, did not simply raise the question of whether women could or could not fence with an epee,[30] but rather what the FIE could do to stimulate their participation, particularly through official recognition within an international competition such as the European championships. Although nothing in the regulations forbade epee use for women, the FIE left the responsibility of trying out such events to the different national federations, "When we have seen them, we will discuss whether or not we want to support these events more or less officially".[31] The President did not wish to challenge the many hostile representations with regards to female epee fencing. Discussion of the proposal was therefore postponed to a future congress. Moreover, the context had become altogether more difficult since the place of female sport in general was under debate at the time, and in view of the IOC Congress to be held in Berlin in 1930, with women's participation in future Olympic Games being far from certain.

Although the time of applying for Olympic recognition of female epee fencing was particularly ill-chosen, opportunities existed for foil fencing. Once again as the result of a proposal by the Danish Fencing Federation, a new ladies foil team event was approved by the FIE in 1932. Foil, indeed, was sufficiently developed in a number of countries to justify the setting-up of one team of four female fencers per nation. Although the event was not yet part of the Olympic Programme, it was held for the first time in Copenhagen, on 5 May, 1932, during the 25th anniversary of the Danish Fencing Federation, which body had been given a cup by fencing fans, just for the occasion. This award was immediately offered to the FIE for the ladies European team championships, as a means of encouraging its organisation on a yearly basis, in the same way as other European championships. For once, comments were rather positive, thanks mainly to the high level of skill reached by the participants.[32]

Denmark was in charge of this first foil team event and witnessed the victory of its own team. The struggle to victory was hard, however, with fierce competition from female fencers from the East, in particular Austria and Hungary. Women from Hungary took the lead soon afterwards and held onto it until the Second World War, with Germany managing to defeat them in 1936.

In spite of this recognition, female foil fencing still suffered from the supposedly weak nature of women. Many proposals were put forward to adapt, simplify and reduce endurance events, in total concordance with the dominant discourse on sport at the time.[33] Thus, in the same way as limits were imposed on women tennis players by the International Federation of Lawn Tennis, FIE President Empeyta suggested, during its Congress in 1930, that the length of assaults between women be shortened to three times five minutes, under the pretext that they hardly ever reached the five valid hits within the authorised time of ten minutes and, as a result, suffered from excessive tiredness. English opposition to the proposal finally resulted in maintaining the *status quo.*[34] Two years later, it was proposed that women should use a specifically shorter sword (the so-called "blade no. 3") in order to limit its weight. Congress rejected the idea, but left open the possibility for both women and national federations to decide what was best in each individual case.[35] Although FIE members were concerned about the image of women fencers, the quality of their performance became progressively as important as any aesthetic, moral or hygienic considerations. When, in 1935, Hungarian delegate Doros referred back to the Congress the suggestion put forward by his fellow citizen Lichtneckert (and refused) in 1929, namely to wear large trousers closed just below the knee, new advantages were mentioned. Times have changed, "Social conventions and prejudices will no longer prevent them being worn in fencing".[36] From this moment on, bloomers became official dress for female fencers, although application of the rule took a long time. It was for concrete reasons – namely the poor economic state of the world of fencing – and not for ethical ones, that the FIE requested, in 1957, that a ladies foil team event be integrated into the Olympic programme.[37] The organisers of the Rome Games accepted the proposal, without attaching any particular conditions, asking only that no more than 21 participants of both sexes per nation be authorised to take part in the fencing tournament. The IOC ratified the decision during its Congress in Tokyo in 1958.[38]

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The Struggle of Female Epee Fencing

In the middle of the Twentieth Century, international female fencing was limited to foil fencing. Thirty years later, such disparity became more difficult to accept. Thanks to new sensitivity in Northern Europe, Canada and the United States, equality of opportunity between the sexes became a leitmotiv during the 1980s. Sport, albeit a male preserve, had no choice but to follow suit and did so with more or less enthusiasm depending on the sport. By way of example, the International Athletic Federation, often considered as a reference by other sport bodies, adopted a new position on the subject, and the events which, until now, 'shook organs', 'exhausted the bodies' or were 'inelegant for women', were successively opened up to women, including 400-metre hurdles in 1976, the marathon in 1980, 10,000 metres in 1985, triple jump in 1990, hammer in 1994, pole vaulting and 5,000 metres in 1995 and, finally, the 3000 metres in 2000.[39]

Fencing was engaged in this spiral, although developments at first concerned only epee fencing. The FIE had to take into account the example of the International Union of Modern Pentathlon (UIPM) which already had an epee event in its own competitions,[40] i.e. world cups since 1978 and world championships since 1981.[41] Moreover, the fencing federations of both France and the USA had already inaugurated ladies epee events, which explained why, in 1983, the Executive Committee of the FIE asked its Regulation Committee to reflect upon the issue. This provoked an immediate and indignant reaction from 76-year-old Ilona Elek - the only FIE Honorary President - in whose opinion the UIPM were allowing women to take mindless risks with regards to the danger of epees.[42] This was an astonishing and passionate defence from one who was considered at the time to be the best *fleurettiste* ever!

As the issue was obviously proving to be a sensitive one, a commission was set up to engage with and encourage debate. It was made up of five women, who were already elected members of the FIE: Ilona Elek (Hungary), Irene Camber (Italy), Kate D'Oriola (France), Mary Glen Haig (Great Britain) and Violeta Katerinska (Bulgaria). The Commission was presided over by a man, Italian Edoardo Mangiarotti and compiled information on the various experiments conducted in Australia, the United States and Great Britain. However, it took a traditional stance when it deemed that more in-depth studies were required into the issues of

protection and safety.[43] Obvious and hackneyed stereotypes surrounding the subject of feminine fragility once again reared their heads.[44]

Faced with a lack of recently published reports, except for those about a national competition organised by Great Britain, the FIE Temporary Commission for Female Epee Fencing then decided to send out a questionnaire to the different delegations attending the 1987 FIE Congress. Results indicated that female epee fencing was flourishing with 23 nations already involved and that international competitions had already taken place in France, Austria, Mexico and the United States.[45] The challenge of the French city of Vincennes, where epee fencing by females had been developing relentlessly since the beginning of the 1980s, succeeded in bringing together 70 European and American competitors.[46] As early as 1988, the Netherlands and France explicitly hinted that they were ready to hold a world championship in ladies epee fencing. "We have reached a turning point", confessed the FIE President. A report in which the scepticism expressed two years earlier was seen to have disappeared provoked a collective reaction during the Federation's Congress, which voted unanimously (minus three abstentions) for the event to be included in the programme of the world championships.[47] To some extent, this vote was unexpected, since previous debate had never really focused on safety and protection matters, two issues which could clearly not be raised without taking into account outdated and discriminatory discourse. On the contrary, attendees wondered more prosaically about the consequences of this new event for the duration and size of the competitions, at a time when the IOC was expressly requesting that international federations reduce their numbers of Olympic participants. In spite of all the fears, a decision was quickly reached, and women were allowed to compete in epee events during a 'world criterion event' that was held in France in 1988, with the aim of trying out the regulations, with the first official world championships being postponed until 1989. It should be noted, however, that the FIE did not break totally with tradition. During the same Congress, when the the Romanian Federation delegate requested an increase in the number of Executive Committee members, in order that two women become members, the proposal did not get beyond the stage of the Statutes Committee, which decreed that gender should not take precedence over competence when selecting members of the Executive Council. [48]

Female epee fencing was experimented with in several countries during its early years. The most successful were initially those where a tradition of female foil fencing already existed, i.e. France, West Germany, Cuba, Italy and Hungary, although new nations also made their entrance at the highest level, including the Netherlands and Switzerland, where a small number of female epeeists had been practising the sport since the inter-war period. The range of medallists during the first world championships brought clearly to light the infancy of the weapon and the absence of any established hierarchy. Hence, a number of rather atypical[physiological] profiles which produced comments triggered by 'machismo' rather than objective observation. For instance, the 1.94m height and 84 kilos frame of German Ute Schäper, silver medallist in the 1989 World Championships, were mentioned in the magazine *Escrime* as "a physical appearance which, it had to be said, is not an excellent advertisement for the sport".[49] Nevertheless, female epee fencing progressed rapidly and was granted Olympic status in the 1996 Games in Atlanta, where French fencers imposed their leadership with Laura Flessel-Colovic and Valerie Barlois respectively winning the gold and silver medals in the individual event and contributing to French victory in the team event.

From Epee to Sabre Fencing: Female Rights to Fence and the Olympics in the Turn of the Century

The successes of female epee fencers paved the way for sabre fencing to quickly follow suit. Hopes were particularly high, given that the gender issue had gained greater visibility in society through obvious discrimination and inequity.[50] Gender equality in sport was one of the main challenges faced by national federations, who often added the issue to their agenda in the 1990s and 2000s and the world of fencing experienced a revolution following decades of patriarchy and machismo. The IOC amended the Olympic Charter in 1994 to assert the requirement for the equality of opportunity for women and from 1996, it regularly organised world conferences on women and sport and requested that national Olympic Committees modify their policies accordingly. The Olympic Charter was soon amended in the same way. Objectives in terms of women's participation in the Olympic Games were fixed and considered as standards that every delegation was expected to meet. Women represented only 15% of the total number of participants at Munich in 1972; that

figure rose to 29% in Barcelona 20 years later and then to 35 % at Atlanta in 1996. There was however, considerable variation from country to country.[51]

After years of resistance, fencing had anticipated the trend in female epee fencing by becoming much less conservative than many other federations. In a sense, the sanctioning of female sabre fencing would complete the change Its recognition certainly had to face a number of common obstacles that were reflected in discourses on a weapon that was considered "too demanding and where the blows are too violent for frail shoulders".[52] Yet, in spite of all this, several countries succeeded in setting up competitions. It was often those countries that had championed the cause of female foil fencing that also promoted female sabre fencing. France, for instance, first staged a ladies sabre event in Saint Jean de la Ruelleo on 16th November, 1997[53] and both Iceland and Norway developed women's use of the weapon early on.[54] The ever-increasing sensibility of the world of sport and the successful integration of female foil and epee fencing, together with the growing number of events held, convinced the FIE to go one step further. During the Congress held on 2nd October, 1998, they voted in favour of the principle that a female sabre event should be included in the programme of the next world championships in Seoul the following year. Three days after the vote, on 5th October, 1998, a pilot competition in female sabre fencing was organised as a prelude to the upcoming fencing world championships in La Chaux de Fonds, Switzerland.

The first world championships were held in Seoul in 1999, where. 59 women specialised in sabre fencing and 14 women's teams gathered together. There were 86 sabre fencers and 20 teams respectively in the case of men participants. The results reflected the domination of three nations, Azerbaijan, Italy and France, with each country having a tradition in male sabre fencing and a reservoir of women foil fencers. In the team event, Italy was victorious over France and Azerbaijan, while in the individual event, Azeri Elena Jemaeva, who trained in Moscow and was married to Russian fleurettiste Mamedov, won the title by beating Italian Ilaria Bianco. Frenchwoman Eve Pouteil-Noble shared the bronze medal with Italian Anna Ferraro. These results reflected an event where, once again, hierarchies had not yet been established and which opened opportunities for fencers. As a result, the sporting careers of a number of individuals progressed at great speed with, for example, bronze medallist Eve Pouteil-Noble winning her medal at the age of 18, although she had only discovered sabre fencing a mere two years earlier.[55]

Although it appeared that the last stronghold of opposition to women's fencing had fallen,[56] the reality was slightly different since the recognition of female sabre fighting thus far had not encompassed national or world championships. The Olympic Games constituted supreme legitimation and were the main objective of the political manifesto put forward by René Roch's for re-election to the FIE Presidency in 2000.[57] After the Second World Championships held in Nimes in 2001, this objective became more apparent, and women sabre fencers "knocked at the door of the Olympic Games".[58]

René Roch succeeded in winning round the IOC when he happened to mention the fact that accepting female sabre fencing would establish gender equity in fencing at long last. The IOC, however, was compelled to limit the expansion of its programme and, for this reason, only authorised a total of ten fencing events. The FIE then found itself faced with a difficult choice: should it add events in female sabre fencing which, in turn, would require the withdrawal of an equivalent number of other events? A few days before the Ordinary Congress of the FIE held in Havana in December 2001, Roch asked Jacques Rogge if the time had not now come to stop including female sabre fencing events. The President of the IOC replied that to do so would be inappropriate or even impolite, since the principle of including female sabre fencing had already been approved. The addition of individual and team sabre events was finally voted for fairly clearly by the FIE, with 50 votes in favour, 23 against and two abstentions. However, this decision created a new dilemma, should the whole programme be reduced to five individual events and five team events or should two events, preferably team events, be deleted? René Roch came up with the totally unexpected proposal of setting up a mixed team event for teams made up of two women and two men![59] The proposal was finally accepted following a series of lengthy discussions.

The idea was of course seen as somewhat shocking and even regarded as being sacrilegious in the world of sport. Barring a few exceptions, there had always been a reluctance to set up mixed events; a division between the sexes always having been favoured. The IOC nevertheless requested that the FIE try out these new mixed events before the Olympic Games and, if necessary, plan alternatives. The matter was once again added to the agenda of the FIE leaders during its Extraordinary Congress in Antalya in April 2002. There, was much discussion there between those who urged that female sabre fencing should be withdrawn, before it became a 'genuinely Olympic' event in Athens in 2004, and those who

felt that two other events should be removed. Throughout the debates, the issue of gender equity took second place to considerations of medal-winning consequences if the decision went one way – or the other. The only consensus reached was that the organising of a mixed event (agreed upon four months earlier in Havana) was now unacceptable as it would be too expensive to add an extra day of competition to the next world championships in Lisbon. There was, therefore, too little time to experiment with sabre fencing in two world championships before the Olympic Games, as the IOC had requested in order to avoid making the Olympic Games itself a testing platform. As Jacques Rogge declared rather abruptly to René Roch, "If you propose a mixed event, we will reject the proposal and go back to the format of the Sydney Games".[60]

Discussion on the topic was postponed to a future date while, at the same time, the FIE voted to decide on the removal of two team events from the Olympic programme by drawing votes out of a hat.[61] This draw resulted in the withdrawal of the female foil and male sabre events and their replacement by two female sabre events. Reactions were immediate, especially from the nations where male sabre fencing was particularly developed, thus obliging the FIE to reconsider its previous decision during the Lisbon Congress.[62]

IOC Sports Director Gilbert Felli insisted that the Olympic Programme in fencing be restricted to ten events and that two of the twelve events of the world championships be removed every four years. Beginning with the Games in Athens, two team events events, the first being female sabre fencing, i.e. one of the two events that had given rise to the problem in the first place would be deleted. The principle of a draw was discarded for the second event - to be removed only temporarily - and a survey was sent to fencers by the FIE Athletes Commission on 1st June. 58 people responded, with 39 of them (less than 1% of the 4,900 fencers consulted) suggesting that the female team foil event be removed. However, during the session in Lisbon, new proposals poured in, including that put forward by the President of the Italian Federation, who supported the idea of a ladies relay in the three weapons. Yet nothing could really justify that the selection of such an event. The Congress, therefore, decided to refer to the result of the Athletes' Commission's survey and came to the rather astonishing decision that female sabre fencing should remain in the Olympic Programme; although this concerned only the individual event and resulted in the removal of the female foil team event.[63] The gender equity issue on which initial arguments had been based had

not lasted for long. In the Athens Games in 2004, men competed in six fencing events and women in only four.

Both the integration of female sabre fencing into the Olympic Programme[64] and the temporary suppression of the female team foil event from the Athens Olympics were confirmed by the IOC Executive Committee in Lausanne on 28th August, 2002. Both female sabre and foil team events had been living on borrowed time and found themselves once again in the modest world championships that were held during the Olympic year. The use of mixed events could easily have solved the problem. Yet, a demonstration test in sabre fencing by a team made up of two men and two women was still held on 23rd August, 2002, during the last day of the world championships in Lisbon, albeit without any title being awarded. During the following FIE Congress, however, René Roch gave up completely on his initial idea by promoting the position of the IOC, "I think that this proposal should be abandoned […]. It does not seem that the International Olympic Committee is favourable to mixed teams".[65] Although fencing had a unique chance to challenge the traditional sporting gender order, the IOC put up two arguments which clearly revealed that its political orientations had never really moved beyond a boundary that was irritrievably wedded to the separation of the sexes. The first argument, which claimed that mixed teams did not exist in other sports, was hardly realistic bearing in mind developments in rackets sports and activities of an artistic nature (such as skating etc.) that portrayed the image of the ideal couple. The second argument simply demonstrated the strength of discrimination within the sports systems of certain cultures:

> These[mixed] teams are hardly conceivable in countries where it is not suitable to let men and women fence together and in these countries, there is obviously, a certain amount of opposition and lobbying within the IOC, which explains why we cannot suggest mixed teams".[66]

The idea of a mixed event was likewise rejected by the top sabre fencing nations: notably Russia, Hungary, Poland and France. Only Germany, China, South Korea, the United States, Great Britain, Japan and Italy accepted the invitation from the FIE to participate in the mixed event in Lisbon.[67]

TERRET, Thierry, **OTTOGALLI-MAZZACAVALLO, Cécile**, « Women in Weapon Land: The Rise of International Women's Fencing", in *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol 29, n°2, 2012, pp. 286-301.

Conclusion: Social Acceptability, Fencing Techniques and Gender

Although women did not take part in the olympic fencing events as early as men, it should be noted that female fencing was included in the Olympic Programme for Paris in 1924. Rather than being the result of a particularly modern gender approach within the fencing community, this early recognition could actually be explained by the pressure exerted over the IOC by influential members of the FIE. In reality, much more time was needed for the different weapon events of female fencing to become fully-fledged parts of the competition. Although the individual foil event appeared in 1924, the team event was not recognised until 1960, with events for the remaining weapons following much later. Female epee fencing became an Olympic event as late as 1996 and the sabre event in 2004, after much protracted debate between the FIE and IOC. In general, the inclusion of events in world championships heralded their Olympic recognition.

The different stages of the process whereby female fencing was recognised by international sports authorities and integrated into the programmes of the world championships and Olympic Games were synonymous with the laborious and difficult struggle of women, especially in Europe, to conquer the equity gap in a sport marked by its masculine connotations. Combat sports likewise often expressed their military legacy with symbolic violence; all sources of masculine domination.[68] The legitimate definition of fencing was socially and historically dominated by a male oligarchy which, beyond the recurrent conflicts linked to issues of national prestige, found an easy consensus in the rejection of women from high-level competitions. Fencing reflected what British sociologist Jennifer Hargreaves describes as "institutionalised discrimination",[69] i.e. the establishment of a social organisation that creates a patriarchal domination over the sport system.

This first interpretation is limited however, since women had access to the Olympic Games and elite competitions in fencing much earlier than in other sports.[70] In light of such an observation, it has been argued that the differences between the three weapons should then be taken into account by cross-referencing the specific chronology of their recognition as women's events with their symbolic and technical characteristics.

Finally, the integration of team events for women experienced delay in comparison with individual events. This helps complete the recent works of sports historians John Loy,

Fiona McLachlan and Douglas Booth who analysed resistance towards women in the Olympic Games by revisiting the works of Eleanor Metheny and Pierre Bourdieu.[71] They observed that team games, which supposed confrontation and body contact, systematically took longer to be recognised as part of the Olympic Programme in the case of women. Yet, team events in fencing are not really 'team sports' in the same way as ball games. They are closer to relays. Nevertheless, the observations of Loy, McLachlan and Booth can be considered justified here, even if contact between opponents is not direct but occurs via use of a weapon. Women succeeded in entering the world of weapons through the main door, although they had not been given the keys.

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[1] For an interesting insight into masculinity and duelling in classical literature, see Low, 'Manhood and the Duel: Enacting Masculinity in Hamlet.' For an example of masculine pride and international fencing events, see Terret Ottogalli, Saint-Martin J., 'The Puliti Affair. Fencing Tradition, Geo-Political Issues and National Pride in Paris 1924'.

[2] McAleer, *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*.

[3] Cohen, *By the Swords: A History of Gladiators, Musketeers, Samurai, Swashbucklers, and Olympic Champions*. On the importance of fencing and dancing in the education of the noblemen see for instance Vaucelle, L'art de jouer à la Cour.

[4] The FIE was created in 1913.

[5] Coubertin's hostility towards women's sport is well reported. See for instance Rosol, 'Pour une participation des Françaises aux Jeux Olympiques (1900-1928). Un combat mené par Alice Milliat'. On French influence over the FIE at the time of its creation and first regulations, see Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo, 'L'escrime olympique (1896-1936) au temps de l'hégémonie franco-italienne'.

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[6] For example: Prudhomme, *Histoire du football féminin au XXe siècle* ; Rosol, 'Une participation contrôlée des Françaises aux épreuves d'athlétisme (1917-fin des années 1950)'.
[7] Albert Lacaze, 'L'escrime féminine', *L'escrime et le Tir*, November 1922.
[8] Minutes of the FIE Congress, 1921.
[9] René Lacroix, 'FIE', *L'escrime et le tir,* July 1922.
[10] On the context of these Games, see Terret, *Les paris des Jeux de 1924*, in particular the first volume: "Les paris de l'organisation".
[11] In 1923, an FIE Commission, which included Armand Massard and Paul Anspach, fixed rules on fencers' dress, i.e. skirts hiding underwear from the knee up. These regulations were in line with concerns expressed by several sports federations in France during the period. See Jamain, *Sport, genre et vêtement sportif. Une histoire culturelle du paraître vestimentaire (fin XIXe siècle – début des années 1970)*.
[12] Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo, Prudhomme-Poncet, Velez, 'Les jeux des dames en 1924 : Echec et mat à la logique d'exclusion du CIO ?'.
[13] Carpentier, Lefèvre, 'The Modern Olympic Movement, Women's Sport and the Social Order during the Inter-War Period'.
[14] Jean Joseph Renaud, 'Les Jeux de la VIIIème Olympiade', *L'escrime et le Tir*, July-August 1928, p. 16.
[15] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Amsterdam, 26th July, 1928.
[16] Armand Massard, 'En assistant à Naples à une floraison de champions d'Europe', *L'escrime et le Tir*, May 1929.
[17] Olympic champion Hélène Mayer is more well-known for her involuntary role in the political instrumentalisation of the 1936 Olympic Games. With a Jewish father, and therefore considered a Jew according to German law, Hélène Mayer was the only member of Jewish confession authorised to take part in the Nazi Games for Germany. She was the pretext Hitler was looking for to respond to the criticisms of the IOC and international press on the absence of Jewish athletes representing Germany. Vice Olympic champion in 1936 and world champion in 1937, she then immigrated to the United States to escape Nazi purges. See Mogulof, *Foiled, Hitler's Jewish Olympian: the Helene Mayer Story*.
[18] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.39.
[19] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.39.
[20] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.40.
[21] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.40.
[22] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.40.
[23] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.41.
[24] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.42.
[25] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.43.
[26] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.43.
[27] S. Jamain, 'Le vêtement sportif des femmes des "années folles" aux années 1960. De la transgression à la "neutralisation" du genre'.
[28] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.72.
[29] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.73.
[30] The debate was already taking place in the magazine *L'escrime et le Tir*, where Joseph Renaud had been an ardent defender of female epee fencing since 1926.
[31] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 26 and 27 April 1929, p.73.
[32] Jean Lacroix, 'Championnats féminins d'Europe de Fleuret', in *L'escrime et le tir*, August 1932.
[33] Terret, 'Femmes, sport, identité et acculturation. Eléments d'historiographie française'.
[34] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Geneva, 19 and 20 May 1930, p.67.
[35] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Brussels, 12 and 13 May 1933, p.19.
[36] Minutes of the FIE Congress, Brussels, 29 and 30 April 1935, p.21.
[37] Pierre Ferri to Avery Brundage, 3rd July, 1957. Archives CIO, Lausanne, Correspondance de la Fédération Internationale d'Escrime : FI-ESCRI-FIE-CORR, 1921-1963, 77'770 SIM DGI 9571.
[38] Pierre Ferri to Avery Brundage, sd[1958], Archives IOC, Lausanne, Correspondance FIE/CIO.
[39] Rosol, 'L'athlétisme français au féminin (1912 - fin des années 1970). Des athlètes en quête d'identité'.
[40] Modern pentathlon is based on five disciplines, namely shooting, horse riding, running, swimming and fencing.
[41] See Le pentathlon moderne, le biathlon et l'Olympisme, in *Revue Olympique*, no.192, October 1983. As a result of its long military origins and history, modern pentathlon was strongly connected to the cult of hegemonic

masculinity. See Heck, 'Modern Pentathlon and World War I – When Athletes and Soldiers Meet to Practise Martial Manliness'; Heck, 'Modern Pentathlon and symbolic violence – a history of female exclusion from Stockholm 1912 to Paris 1924'.

[42] Minutes of the 64th FIE Congress, Al Alghero, 20th-21st May 1983, p.10. Italian Nostini added that the FIE had to impose its views on the subject over the IUPM and not the other way round.

[43] Minutes of the 67th FIE Congress, Paris, 23-24 May 1986, p.75.

[44] Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*.

[45] Minutes of the 68th FIE Ordinary Congress, Versailles, 5-6 June 1987, pp.21-23.

[46] Michel Salesse, 'Vive les femmes', *Escrime*, no.2, May 1986, p.19.

[47] Ilona Elek's absence from the discussions undoubtedly had an effect here. The Hungarian passed away a few months later, in May 1988.

[48] Minutes of the 68th Ordinary Congress of the FIE, Versailles, 5th-6th June 1987, p.25. Moreover, the Executive Committee esteemed that the question was 'not urgent'.

[49] Epée féminine individuelle, *Escrime*, no.20, September-October 1989, p.23.

[50] Thébaud, *Ecrire l'histoire des femmes et du genre*.

[51] Smith, *Nike is a Goddess: The History of Women in Sports*.

[52] Sabre au féminin dès 1999, *Le Monde*, 7 October, 1998.

[53] Première compétition nationale de « sabreuses » !, *Escrime magazine*, no.58, February 1998, p.4.

[54] Le sabre dame, une utopie devenue réalité, *Escrime magazine*, no.63, March, 1999, p.8.

[55] Françoise Chaptal, La nouvelle Eve, *Escrime magazine*, no.67, December 1999, pp.15-17.

[56] Stéphane Lauer, Les femmes prennent d'assaut la dernière forteresse de l'escrime, *Le Monde,* 3 November 1999.

[57] Minutes of the 81st Ordinary Congress of the FIE, Paris, 9th December 2000, p. 19.

[58] Gilles Van Kote, Le sabre féminin a bénéficié d'une reconnaissance accélérée, *Le Monde,* 28 October 2001.

[59] Minutes of the 82nd Ordinary Congress of the FIE, Havana, 8-9 December, 2001, p. 72-83.

[60] Minutes of the FIE Extraordinary Congress, Lisbon, 17th August, 2002, p. 12.

[61] Minutes of the FIE Extraordinary Congress, Antalya, 7th April 2002, pp. 17-40.

[62] Minutes of the FIE Extraordinary Congress, Lisbon, 17th August, 2002, pp. 11-21.

[63] Minutes of the FIE Extraordinary Congress, Lisbon, 17th August, 2002, p. 21.

[64] Le sabre féminin presque olympique, *Le Monde*, 20th August, 2002.

[65] Minutes of the 83rd Congress of the FIE, Leipzig, 22-23 November 2003, p. 21.

[66] René Roch on the subject of his discussions with the IOC. Minutes of the 83rd Congress of the FIE, Leipzig, 22-23 November 2003, pp. 21.

[67] Jean-Marie Safra, Examen de passage réussi pour l'épreuve par équipe de sabre masculin et féminin, *Escrime internationale*, no.41, 2001, p. 24.

[68] Bourdieu, *La domination masculine*.

[69] Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, p. 174.

[70] Earlier female sports events in the Olympic Games were archery, diving, figure skating, golf, swimming and tennis.

[71] Loy, McLachlan, Booth, 'Connotations of Female Movement and Meaning. The Development of Women's Participation in the Olympic Games'.