

## The Growing Importance of Women's Participation in Sport a Reality that Can Hardly Be Ignored

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### INTRODUCTION

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In 1967, a woman filled in a registration form for the world-renowned Boston Marathon. She signed her name "K. Switzer". She did not have to indicate "male" or "female" because at that time, women were not allowed to even run in the marathon. On race day, doing her best to disguise the fact that she was female, she lined up at the start-line wearing bib number 261. During the race, a number of men tried to physically pull her off the course but her coach and her large, muscular hammer thrower boyfriend protected her. Katherine Switzer finished the race to become the first woman to complete a marathon in the United States as an officially registered runner.

Katherine went on to become an active advocate for women in sport both by word and deed: she placed third in the Boston Marathon in 1972, fourth in 1973 and second in 1975; she won the 1974 New York City Marathon, she won awards in television broadcasting as a commentator for marathons, she has written books on the topic of running and walking for women, she created an international women's marathon circuit in the 1970's and is currently involved in promoting grassroots fitness for women via another international running circuit – **but her greatest achievement will always be that she was the woman who broke the gender barrier at the 1967 Boston Marathon.**

1967 is only 31 years ago - within most of our lifetimes. Thirty-one years ago, women had no place in the world of sports. While the playing field is not exactly level, it is now more balanced than at any time in history. Today, women are involved in sport of all kind. And their numbers are growing. However, women's increased involvement in sport has not been an automatic process. It has required a lot of work by both women, such as Katherine Switzer, and their supporters.

Society is changing, and there is more and more emphasis being placed on gender equity in all areas of work and play. In response to this change, there is now a growing momentum throughout the world to increase the number of women in the military. There is a corresponding need therefore, to ensure that women in the military are not just fit and healthy but that they are also given the opportunity to achieve gender sports equity.

The aim of my presentation today is to give you an appreciation of the growing importance of women's participation in sport as we approach a new millennium and how it relates to women in the military. The topics I will briefly cover are as follows:

- a) Some significant milestones and movements in women's sport in the world today,
- b) Current Canadian experience regarding women in the military and sport, and
- c) The importance of female role models in encouraging women to make sport part of their lives.

## WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE WORLD TODAY

A number of positive milestones have been achieved over the past few years regarding women in sport. In addition, there are movements throughout the world aimed at raising the profile of women's participation in sport. Some of those milestones and movements are as follows:

- The 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta were a record setting event. They showcased the talents of women athletes more than ever before. The women Olympians in Atlanta made up 36.5% of the total athletes. They came from 169 countries, competing in 108 events and representing 21 sports. Of the 8.6 million spectators tickets bought, 3.9 million or 45% were for women's events - note that this exceeds the total number of tickets sold (3.7 million) for all events at the 1992 Barcelona Games.

### OLYMPIC GAMES PARTICIPATION

	1896 First Modern Olympics	1900 First Women in Olympics	1992 Summer Olympics	1994 Winter Olympics	1996 Summer Olympics	1997 Winter Olympics
Women's Events	0	3	86	25	108	29
Men's Events			159	34	163	38
Women Competitors	0	11	3,008	521	3,785	915
Men Competitors			7,555	1,216	6,596	1,677
Totals			10,563	1,737	10,381	2,593
Percentages			28.5%	30%	36.5%	35.3%

- In October 1996, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) staged a World Conference on Women and Sport in Lausanne, Switzerland with over 220 participants from around the world. The result of the conference was the adoption of a resolution consisting of a number of recommendations for the future, including most notably:

“Recommends that all women involved in sport be provided equal opportunities for professional and personal advancement, whether as athletes, coaches or administrators, and that the International Federations (IFs) and the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) create special committees or working groups composed of at least 10% women to design and implement a plan of action with a view to promoting women in sport.”

-The 1<sup>st</sup> World Conference on Women and Sport was held in Brighton, England in 1994. It was attended by 280 decision-makers in sport from around the world. A Declaration on Women and Sport was approved, an International Working Group on Women and Sport was established and an International Strategy was developed. Since 1994 over 120 governments, International Sport Federations, National Olympic Committees and other international bodies, have formally endorsed the Declaration.

-The 2<sup>nd</sup> World Conference on Women and Sport was held in Windhoek, Namibia in May 1998. Over 400 delegates from 74 countries participated. The 1998 Conference agreed to convert the principles of the Brighton Declaration into a Call for Action. The Windhoek Call for Action outlined priorities for the "Women and Sport" movement from now until 2002.

- The 3<sup>rd</sup> World Conference on Women and Sport will be hosted by Canada in the spring of 2002.

-The International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) has declared 1998 as "The Year of Women in Athletics". Merlene Ottey, a Jamaican sprinter and an Olympic Medallist (200M), has been chosen by the IAAF as its main patron and ambassador to the world. Its aim is to increase the visibility of women in sport and is to foster a change in the mentality that still perceives women's sport to be of less importance than men's sport. In keeping with this latter goal, the IAAF does not make a distinction between men and women in its competition awards.

-A United States beauty products company, Avon, led by Katherine Switzer, is currently sponsoring a worldwide grassroots fitness program for women. Between 1977 and 1985, Avon sponsored an international women's marathon program. Its financial backing and worldwide involvement were major contributors to making the women's marathon an official event in the Olympic Games (1984). Its new program consists of a series of 10-km runs, 5-km walks and pre-race clinics to promote an active and healthier lifestyle for women. The circuit is open to 16 countries this year: Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Venezuela, Panama, Mexico, Canada, Thailand, China, Malaysia, the Philippines and the United States. The program has been designed to allow women of all ages to simultaneously participate in elite racing or recreational walking in one international circuit. Winners of the 10 km races in the open and masters divisions will win an all-expense paid trip to the Avon Global Championships in May 1999 in New York City to compete for 50,000 US, the richest cash prize in the history of women's 10 km running!

## THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

Women currently make up 10% of the Canadian Regular Forces and 18% of the Primary Reserve Forces. These women are serving in all aspects of Canadian Forces (CF) operations including humanitarian and peacekeeping activities. All occupations and all units are open to women with the sole exception of submarine service. The Canadian Forces is currently in the middle of a new advertising and public relations program to recruit women into the combat arms branch of the Canadian army. The target is 250 women. To-date, 302 women have been recruited. With their increased role in the Canadian Forces, women are now finding that they must be prepared and capable of performing a variety of tasks under conditions that can be extremely adverse. Therefore, the need for military women to be optimally fit and healthy is becoming an important issue and it is recognized that participation in sport is an excellent way to achieve this goal.

How is the CF addressing this need to encourage women to be fit through participation in sport?

-Fitness is a personal responsibility in the Canadian Forces. All military personnel are allowed time during working hours on a daily basis to participate in a sport or fitness activity, operational commitments permitting. Personnel must pass an annual fitness test. If they fail they are placed on a mandatory fitness program and if they continue to fail they may be released from the military.

-Women Officer Cadets make up 24.8% of Canada's Royal Military College (RMC). It is recognized that the women who graduate from the College are the future leaders

and role models for military women throughout Canada. If these women become involved in sport during their school years, when they finish school and join units throughout Canada, they will be in a position to encourage other military women to enter sport. Therefore, emphasis is being placed on developing women's sports at the College. The Athletic Director is a woman. The fitness instructors and coaches, both men and women, are young, keen University graduates with up-to-date progressive ideas. To-date in 1998, 46% of the female cadets and 35% of the male cadets are active on military college sports teams. (Just a few weeks ago we received word that a female cadet from the college won a bronze medal in the CISM swimming championships in Rome and that she was also part of two silver medal relay teams).

-One third of all fitness instructors at units and bases across Canada are female. This increase in the percentage of female fitness instructors was made only in the last two years.

-Fitness facilities are open to all military personnel and cater equally to men and women. With the increased number of women in the military, there is a need to expand and upgrade women's facilities such as change rooms and locker rooms. A construction program is currently under way to replace women's facilities. This project should be completed by 2001.

-The introduction of new sports for women is being explored. Women's ice hockey and women's football are the two sports that are being considered based on the growing popularity of the sport in the civilian sector and the interest of military women who are currently playing on civilian teams.

-Current competitive sports are being reviewed to make them more appealing to women. For example, regional and national running competitions have changed the women's race from 10-km to 5-km in hopes that women will be less intimidated by the distance and more interested in competing.

-The CF organizes an annual Sports Awards Banquet for the military where a Female and Male athlete of the year are recognized equally.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE ROLE MODELS**

Studies show that women identify more closely with female role models than male role models.

A recent Canadian study showed that a mother who participated in sport increased the participation rate of her daughter by 22% while a father who participated in sport only increased the participation rate of his daughter by 11%. By extrapolation, one can also assume that women in the military are more likely to pursue sport if they have female role models to emulate.

The military needs more visible, approachable and accessible female role models in sport. In addition, we in the military must make every effort to celebrate the achievements of our female sportswomen.

There are many different ways of being a role model:

- a. Women in the military, officers and NCO's, who hold positions of authority must be role models themselves and lead by example:

**Example:** In the Canadian Forces, we recently had a female officer commanding an army unit - 1 Field Ambulance. This woman had been involved in sport during her entire military career as an all around athlete. Her command consisted of 120 military men and 30 military women. She instituted a morning physical fitness regime in which she participated on a daily basis and even led on occasion. Over the course of her command, she noted a significant increase in the number of women voluntarily participating in sport activities. When the annual "Mountain Man" competition was announced, the first woman to sign up was a woman from 1 Field Ambulance. (Every year, 1 Brigade holds a very demanding event called the "Mountain Man" competition. It consists of a forced march in full combat gear, canoeing, a canoe portage and another forced march. It takes participants anywhere from 3 to 7 hours to complete the competition.)

- b. The military must make a strong effort to celebrate the accomplishments of sportswomen by making their achievements more visible. This can be accomplished in many simple ways:

- photographs, articles in unit newsletters,
- photographs, articles posted in the gymnasium,
- recognition during personnel briefings/assemblies, and
- by ensuring that a document that shows a photograph of a male athlete also shows a photograph of a female athlete,
- arrange for military sportswomen to speak to groups of military women about their experiences in sports, the benefits they have received from sports, how they became involved in sports, and
- encourage military sportswomen to mentor other military women who are newcomers to a particular sport.

- c. Role models must be approachable and accessible. Elite athletes are of great importance; they provide inspiration, they give their sport credibility and visibility. However, the average woman cannot identify with such a lofty personage as an elite athlete. Therefore it is the "Top of the Sport" athlete who perhaps has the most influence as a role model and more time to devote to such a task.

The influence that role models in sport wield should not be underestimated. An example is women's ice hockey in Canada. Ice hockey is Canada's national sport. Hockey stars are Canada's national heroes. Women's ice hockey made its debut at the Nagano Winter Olympics. Spurred on by the example of the Canadian women's Olympic hockey team, girls hockey is a hot, new demographic in Canada's minor hockey system. In the last decade, female registration in the Canadian Hockey Association has increased by 219% compared with 24% for boys. Although girls enrolment is only 6% of boys', hockey officials predict that the number of girls could triple over the next three years.

## CONCLUSION

One half of the world's population is female. For sports to grow and flourish in the next millennium, we need to involve women at all levels. It is as simple as that. The IOC has, with its 1996 resolution, launched the first initiative in this direction. In order to be a modern and viable entity in the new millennium, military forces of the world, and in particular CISM, must follow its lead.