# London Games – a barrier breaker for female athletes

**By Bill Saporito, Time**

A week after the cinematic opening ceremony on July 27, London's Olympics were flagging. Of course there were events and medals in the ensuing days, but the showdown between American swimmers Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte was a bit of a fizzle, and Team Great Britain had been a relative no-show. Sparse crowds at some events in the opening days and breakdowns and delays on the London Underground had the British tabloids in a snarling, told-you-so mood about the nation's penchant for punching below its weight. Games boss Sebastian Coe wasn't too happy either. When one reporter offered to show him a digital image of empty seats, Lord Seb sassed back that he would be happy to "look at your holiday snaps later."

Then, over one stellar weekend, the women of the Olympics changed everything, righting the ship for the Games and sending Team GB toward its best Olympics in 104 years. The signature performance of these Games would come from Jessica Ennis, Britain's luminous heptathlete and the official face of the Games. On the morning of the hurdles, the heptathlon's first event, she put a charge into Olympic Stadium with a first-place finish. One night later, that charge became a full-fledged thunderbolt as "our Jess," as the tabloids then lovingly called her, blazed down the straightaway to claim the 800-m event—and the gold—before a delirious crowd. "She's an astonishing combination of a great athlete and lovely person," said David Luard, 31, a small-business owner from London, in the stadium after Ennis took gold. "You know, these Olympics are all about passing a torch to a new generation. She's a fantastic example for kids."

She was the brightest star on Britain’s day of glory, when nearly 72,000 spectators swarmed the Olympic Park, filling 92 percent of the available places, with the royal cheerleading couple of Prince William and Kate Middleton first among them.

Ennis’ gold wasn’t the only spectacular moment for female athletes over that weekend. On the water, in the double sculls, Team GB’s Katherine Grainger and Anna Watkins steamed home before 30,000 spectators. Nearby in the velodrome, the Games’ noisiest and sweatiest venue, Team GB’s women vanquished the U.S. in the pursuit race, shattering their own world record. The following Monday, the U.S. women’s soccer team clashed with their Canadian cousins in an epic semifinal, winning 4-3 in the dying seconds of overtime. The match left observers in England, the home of soccer, wondering why they even bothered to watch the men play, since they’ve produced so very little in this tournament. “We never think we’re out of it,” says Megan Rapinoe, the platinum-topped American wing half who scored two goals, the second an absolute screamer. “We’re kind of like, ‘OK, that just means we need to score another one.’ Huge heart, huge fight on this team.” The U.S. men’s team failed to even qualify. The U.S. women went on to play Japan in the gold-medal match, in a repeat of the World Cup final last year.

The color scheme of the London Olympics includes bubble-gum pink, but there’s nothing pink or fluffy about these women’s performances. London has provided a joyous parade of amazons. The first gold went to a female shooter from China, the first gold for Team GB went to rowing duo Helen Glover and Heather Stanning, and some of the most compelling stories were spun by women: for every Michael Phelps, Usain Bolt and Andy Murray, there was Missy Franklin, Jess Ennis and Serena Williams. For nearly half of the 57 nations that earned a medal in the first week, women outnumbered men on the podium.

**It only took a century**

There were victories for women even before the Games commenced. London distinguished itself as the first Olympics in which all countries sent teams of both genders. (OK, Nauru sent men only, but then again, it sent only two; in 2008 it sent a lone female.) The longest holdouts—Qatar, Brunei and Saudi Arabia—counted seven female athletes among them, competing in sports from swimming to table tennis to judo. At the opening ceremony, International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge noted with satisfaction that "for the first time in Olympic history, all the participating teams will have female athletes. This is a major boost for gender equality."

That only took a century or so. Consider that in 1996, 26 nations declined to send women. Forty years after Title IX changed sports for girls in the U.S. by banning discrimination in federally assisted education programs, the rest of the world, it seems, is still catching up. Now, with the introduction of women's boxing—hey, knock yourself out, girls—competitors of both sexes can pit themselves against the best in the world in nearly every sport. Synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics alone remain women-only. (Perhaps it's time that the IOC consider extending those sports to men, in the name of equality.) When women were invited to the Olympics in 1900, they could compete in just three sports: lawn tennis, croquet and golf. The list now includes 34 sports in which both men and women compete. As if to underscore that point, in winning the women's 400-m individual medley in world-record time, Chinese swimmer Ye Shiwen swam her last 50-m freestyle leg faster than Lochte did in his freestyle leg (a feat so stunning that some accused Ye of doping).

Women have become a competitive advantage if running up the medal count is the goal—and in many countries, it is. China, which claimed the most gold medals of any nation at its home Olympics in 2008, has made women's sports a keystone of its so-called gold-medal strategy. Figuring that women's sports

are still underfunded in many countries, the Chinese have disproportionately boosted their female athletes. The efforts have paid off. In Beijing, more than half of China's gold medals came from women. This time around, by Aug. 8, Chinese women had won 42 medals, 55 percent of the nation's total.

India's all-time individual-gold-medal count nearly doubled, to two, thanks to its first female boxer, Mary Kom, or to use her formal name, Chungneijang Hmangte. The five-time world champion, who is from an ethnic minority, won a bronze in London in the inaugural sport of women's boxing. She is a 29-year-old mother of two from the tiny, insurgency-ridden northeastern Indian state of Manipur. She is what is known as a Tribal, similar to being Inuit or native Hawaiian. Kom gets a salary from the Manipuri government as a police officer but spends much of her time running, with her husband, the M.C. Mary Kom Boxing Academy, through which she is determined to give nearly 40 disadvantaged Manipuri youth a fighting chance.

Kom's medal will easily raise India's sporting stature. India ranks dead last in medals as weighted by population. The country of more than 1 billion people has captured only one Olympic gold in an individual sport, from Abhinav Bindra, a man who won the 10-m air-rifle event in 2008.

By contrast, the U.S. fielded its first female-majority team—women outnumbered men 268 to 261—and turned that advantage into more medals on the women's side. (Women also made up the majority on the Russian and Chinese squads.) In swimming, Teri McKeever is the first female head coach for the U.S. women's team, and her touch made a huge impact, according to the athletes. "It's so much fun to talk to each other rather than be talked at," says Rebecca Soni, who won three medals in London, of the atmosphere of openness that McKeever encourages. Says two-time Olympian Dana Vollmer: "These team members were way more open with each other than past ones. All of us want to win, and we know what an honor it is to represent the U.S., but sometimes before a race, that's not

exactly what we need to hear. What we need to hear is that we are ready and we've done the work. And that's what Teri told us."

McKeever says it's about understanding that while male and female athletes want the same thing—to win—they use different methods to achieve victory. "As a coach, you want to allow the athlete to be empowered to be their best," she says. "And men and women typically go about that journey in different ways." For the female swimmers, making the Olympic rookies and the veterans comfortable enough to share their fears and experiences built bonds that conquered performance anxiety and led to a 14-medal tally.

Which may be why in team play, the American women have been more than equal to their male counterparts. Some of that is expected. In soccer, the U.S. women will have played in four consecutive finals. In basketball, a gold medal seems as likely for the women as it does for the NBA-superstar-studded men. In water polo, the women will again outdo the men in reaching the medal round. In rowing, the U.S. women's eight, the ranking world champions, claimed gold in that showpiece event, while the men failed to show. And on the faux royal beach at the Horse Guards Parade near Buckingham Palace, the U.S. was guaranteed gold and silver in bikini sports. Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh beat fellow citizens April Ross and Jennifer Kessy in the beach-volleyball championship match.

**'I really inspire them'**

It wasn't just that more women competed—they made history as well. In gymnastics, American Gabrielle Douglas achieved a pioneering twofer, becoming the first African American to win the coveted all-around title and the first U.S. gymnast to flip and tumble her way to gold in both that event and the team competition. Told about her achievement, the excited 16-year-old said, "You learn something new every day!"

Another American woman who appeared in the Olympics set a mark of a different sort. Sarah Attar, 19, a dual American and Saudi citizen who attends college in California, finished last in her 800-m heat while representing the Middle Eastern nation. Although she wore long sleeves, leggings and a head covering in London, she has competed for Pepperdine University in the typical track outfit of a tank top and shorts, without anything obscuring her hair. She was given a warm round of applause as she plodded across the finish line.

Attar is one of two women representing Saudi Arabia at the Games. The other, 16-year-old judoka Wojdan Shaherkani, provoked some controversy when the International Judo Federation initially ruled that she could not compete while wearing a headscarf. No deal, said the Saudi officials whose approval of female athletes at the Games was contingent on headscarves. After last-minute negotiations, the IJF relented a couple of days before Shaherkani's first bout. She competed with a black head covering that resembled a swimmer's cap. Shaherkani lost her preliminary-round match in the +78 kg category in 80 seconds, not surprising given that she is only a judo blue belt competing among black belts. Still, she figures she won just by competing. "I am very excited, and it was the opportunity of a lifetime," she said after her loss. "Hopefully this will be the start of bigger participation for other sports. Hopefully this is the beginning of a new era."

As if to trumpet its newfound egalitarianism, Brunei designated its first—and only—female participant, 400-m runner Maziah Mahusin, as its flag bearer. "Women in Brunei say that I really inspire them," she says. "They say they aspire to be like me some day." Both Brunei and Qatar have unveiled—if that is the appropriate word—programs to encourage girls to participate in sports. Not quite Title IX, but a step forward in two very conservative countries.

It's tempting to contrast the slow growth in sporting opportunities in the Middle East and elsewhere with those in

Britain, where women have had voting rights since 1918. And where funding, some via the national lottery, has not only produced champions in traditional strengths like rowing and cycling but also given women the chance to participate in other sports like water polo. It's unrealistic to expect Brunei women to be competing in bathing suits anytime soon.

The more pertinent comparison may be with the next Olympic host, Brazil. Like Brunei and Qatar, Brazil is an oil-producing country that is growing rapidly. Unlike in the Muslim countries, the female body in Brazil is a subject of open admiration. But it's often an idealized, sexualized image of the female body that hasn't necessarily translated into creating better athletes. Brazil has twice the population of Britain, is home to some of the greatest soccer players ever seen and has claimed less than a fifth of the medals. Only two Brazilian women won medals through the first 12 days of the Games, both in judo, a Brazilian strength. Mayra Aguiar, 21, won bronze in the +78 kg class, while Sarah Menezes, 22, won gold in the –48 kg class.

One lesson from London is that if sports mean anything, putting women on a pedestal, whether religious or hedonistic, won't put them on the podium. Because of those tendencies in wider society, they need more help, not less, than men to even consider a career in sports and to get the training they need to realize their potential. These Games will have helped, filling stadiums and screens with fantastic female role models. The imagery of strong female bodies of all shapes and sizes provides a brief but powerful corrective to the representations of femininity that usually predominate. London exposed a fallacy: that women's sports are less gripping, less serious and less entertaining than men's. The women have made glorious the Summer Olympics. As Shakespeare might have put it: To play is the thing.