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Overcoming the obstacles: How New Zealand women have shone at the Olympic Games

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 Overcoming the obstacles: How New Zealand women have shone at the Olympic Games

Co-authored by Ian Anderson, The Post

ANALYSIS: When [Barbara Kendall](#) won gold in 1992, she had no idea she was just the second New Zealand woman to win a gold medal at the Summer Olympics.

It was only when the windsurfing legend competed at Athens in 2004 as a mother that she began to think deeply about the obstacles women in sport have had to face at the Olympic Games.

Kendall, who describes herself as “forever an optimist”, was certainly aware that sportswomen did not have a level playing field.

“When I was competing on the professional circuit, we definitely had the raw end of the stick,” Kendall said.

“We only got 20% of the prize purse. You had to be in the top five if you wanted to continue on the circuit.

“And particularly for me, coming from such a small country, it was hard to get industry sponsorship, because we had a very small market.”

But at the past two Summer Olympics, women have won more medals than men for New Zealand.

At the 2024 Paris Olympics starting later this month, New Zealand will have a swag of female athletes capable of glory - [Lisa Carrington](#) (this country’s most prolific Olympic medalist), [Ellesse Andrews](#), [Erika Fairweather](#), [Aimee Fisher](#), [Eliza McCartney](#) and [Lydia Ko](#) among them.

But it’s been a long and grueling climb for women to even get close to equality at the Olympic Games, with the Paris Games expecting to have as many females as males competing for the first time.

In Paris in 1900, 22 women competed in five events - tennis, sailing, croquet, equestrian and golf - just 2.2 per cent of the total competitors.

During the next 20 years, most countries sent far fewer female competitors, and only partly because they would incur the cost of a chaperone.

At the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, many reports said a number of the nine competitors in the final of the 800 metres - the longest track event on offer for women - either failed to complete the race or collapsed through exhaustion.

Yet while those reports were false - just one runner did not finish and the others were simply drained by their exertions - the IOC dropped the event from the Olympics programme until 1960.

It wasn’t until 1984 that a women’s marathon was contested, while those Games in Los Angeles saw women make their debut in cycling, competing in the road race.

“My first memory of the Olympics was when [gymnast] Nadia Comaneci scored a perfect 10 - and I just thought 'oh, I want to go to the Olympic Games',” Kendall said of the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

“But I had no idea there was a very limited choice of what sports you could do.

“What is great about New Zealand sport is that women are given the platform to be able to do that.

“In many nations, they're fighting so many prejudices that they don't get the opportunity to do what women in New Zealand do.

“So there's still obstacles - particularly around when you want to have children and careers are cut short.

“When I had two kids and was planning an Olympic campaign, I realised this was something that not many people had done. I know that I changed quite a lot with kids, and my approach to competing was very very different.

“I got knocked back a lot then - because I didn't fit into the box of what was required, what was normal.”

Kereyn Smith became the first woman to become the head of the New Zealand Olympic Committee in 2010, and held the role for over a decade before stepping down.

She said the 2016 Rio Olympics was a milestone one for New Zealand. The country had more women team members than men for the first time (100 women and 99 men) and women won 11 of the 18 medals.

Smith said when 1952 gold medallist Yvette Williams - New Zealand's first female Olympic medal-winner - attended the celebrations, it was almost a shock to many current athletes that the country had had so few female gold medallists until recently.

"It's about the opportunities - the offerings have increased exponentially for women in the last 20 years in particular," Smith said.

"Since that ruling made by the IOC [in 1991] that if an event comes into the Olympic Games it has to have a male and female version, I think that's really accelerated the opportunities."

Kendall moved into administration after competing at five Olympics and winning gold, silver and bronze, was elected as a member of the IOC and the IOC Athletes' Commission and sat on the Women In Sport Commission until August 2016.

"Even when I became an IOC member, what I had to face in that respect of being a female leader and the obstacles that had to be overcome were quite a lot as well.

"But you just did it."

"Where are the boundaries? I don't think women have found those yet. It's changed because the doors have opened up.

"What I think is great is that the IOC has made a conscious effort to make sure to have that gender parity. Now there's that, that will help with women coaches, women referees, women officials.

"The IOC took leadership in this, otherwise we'd still be a long way back from where we are.

"Even when I joined the IOC's Women In Sport Commission in 2009, what we were then facing, it was just like this broken record."

There remain challenges ahead for women in sport at the Olympics to tackle, including greater coverage of women's events.

Women at the Games are still more likely to be described using physical features, age, marital status and aesthetics than men are, as opposed to sport related adjectives and descriptions, while women are also more likely to be referred to as "girls" than men were to be called "boys" in commentary.


Smith, who considers herself 'a champion of change' in terms of diversity and inclusion, said having more women in leadership has been really important.


Kendall concurred.


"If you don't have male leadership understanding the value of what female leadership can bring into the sporting arena - as far as marketing goes, and the value of women's sports teams, the fans that are now supporting ... we've seen it now with the women's Rugby World Cup, the women's football and cricket World Cups in New Zealand, there's been a real shift, and how exciting women's sport can be."

Smith said one of the major reasons of the New Zealand team's success in Tokyo "was the fact we were across a lot of different events, a lot of different cultures.

"When we talked about the Olympics, it was always about rowing, yachting, track and field, swimming and equestrian. Now it's about such a diverse range of sports and a diverse range of people, and naturally you see more young women coming through as well."


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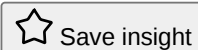
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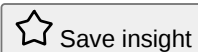


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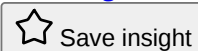


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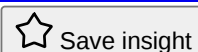


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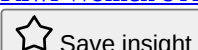
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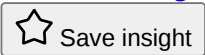
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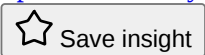
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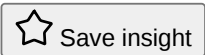
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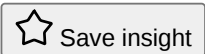
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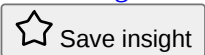
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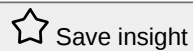


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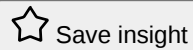


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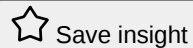


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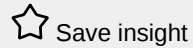


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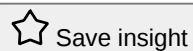


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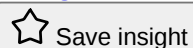


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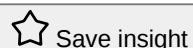


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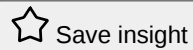
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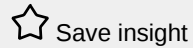


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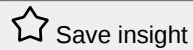
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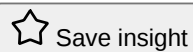
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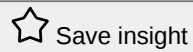


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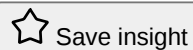
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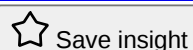
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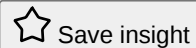
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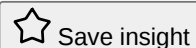
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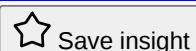
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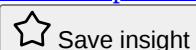
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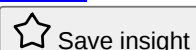
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