

WHAT THE OLYMPICS MEANT TO ME

*Aileen Riggin Soule**

There were no professionals in my day, as there are today, because swimming was such a new sport and the big shows, aquacades, and movies came later. When it came time for me to retire at age nineteen (after two Olympiads), I reluctantly turned professional. There was a stigma connected with the word "pro" in those days. I would teach and give exhibitions of diving and swimming and have seasonal jobs at resorts, clubs, etc. There was no "big money" in women's swimming and diving. Later, with Esther Williams and Eleanor Holm, there was more opportunity.

The Olympics meant a great deal to me. In 1920, when I was fourteen, I tried out for the team. There was much controversy over sending women to the Games. There had been some women from northern European countries in the 1912 Games in Stockholm, but 1920 was to be the first time that American women participated in regular Olympic events. The United States Olympic Committee felt that the team should be for men only, as in ancient Greece, but women from other countries were going and our managers finally convinced them to send a female team. The women's participation was limited to only the swimming events. Many of the coaches and officials felt females should not be allowed on the team and it took a great deal of persuasion by American women to convince them that women should be able to participate.

However, when Helen Wainwright, also fourteen, and I won places on the team, the U.S. Olympic Committee said they would not be responsible for "children" on the team. Helen weighed seventy-five pounds and I weighed sixty-five pounds, so we really did look like "children." There was another battle regarding our participation. There were several meetings and then the Olympic Committee informed us that they would take the next-highest rated women in our

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place. Our manager and several other women lodged a complaint and there was a very "heated" meeting. After packing and unpacking our trunks several times, we were finally allowed to keep our spots on the team.

There was a great deal of discussion in newspapers and magazines about the dangers of overdoing our training and ruining our health. After our team won everything at the 1920 Olympics (four out of five events), the controversy regarding female athletes seemed to quiet.

It is hard to believe today, but there was also a controversy regarding our bathing suits. Before the Games, we were issued new suits. They were made of cotton and had legs to the knees and sleeves to the elbow. They were cut rather low and were full-fashioned. The suits were enormous and Helen Wainwright and I were not, so we were permitted to wear our own suits. In fact, I don't think any of the American girls wore those suits. I did save mine as a joke to take out and laugh at once in awhile. The swimming suit I wore was made out of silk and it had a skirt across the front. We usually showed ourselves only at the start, as we wore a robe to and from the starting blocks. We wore woolen suits with skirts in the diving events and I felt more comfortable. However, at times during a dive, the skirt would fly out and ruin the line of the dive. The older women divers wore suits with long skirts and they were very attractive. Because I was considered a child, I wore a short suit.

Swimming was a different world in the 1920's. My club, Women's Swimming Association of New York, had a motto: "Good sportsmanship is greater than victory." I know it sounds unreal now, but the team was the most important thing in our competitive lives. We had to win and lose graciously. My club was staffed by volunteers and even as a child of 12, I had to try my hand and teaching swimming to beginners. Our coach, Mr. Louis de B. Handley, donated his time once a week to helping advanced swimmers. Mr. Handley had been on the 1904 Olympic Water Polo Team and he was a great inspiration to us. Many of his swimmers became National and World (Olympic) champions. My teammate, Gertrude Ederle, became the first woman to swim the English Channel. Some of my other teammates were Eleanor Holm and Helen Meany. Mr. Handley is also well remembered because he changed the freestyle (then called the Australian crawl) kick. In those days, everyone did a scissors kick - actually it was one scissors kick to three kicks on the other side. Mr. Handley originated the American crawl and we were the first to use

it. It was far superior and everytime we entered the water, we were breaking records.

The Olympics were a glorious adventure. It took thirteen days to get to Antwerp where the Games were held and we got to know most of the other Olympic athletes. There were 400 men and 15 women - a nice ratio! Now there are jet planes and the athletes leave as soon as the Games are over. We got to know each other well and we made many lifelong friends in all sports, not just swimming and diving.

Yes, the Olympic Games have changed, but they still inspire all of us and the spirit of the Games will live on forever!