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Women, wrestling, and the Games: Olympic normalization of a practice (1996-2001)

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ABSTRACT: A bastion of masculinities, wrestling offers a significant context for observing and analyzing the inequalities between men and women in sport. Examining the inclusion of women's wrestling as an Olympic discipline in September 2001 helps to understand the hierarchy existing between wrestling styles and, consequently, between genders. Women's wrestling was in fact constructed as a distinct style from the two styles for men, freestyle and Greco-Roman, and was based on the myth of women's fragility. Analyzing the archives of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the correspondence between the IOC and the International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles (FILA), as well as the two organizations' meeting and commission reports, together with interviews of FILA stakeholders in the 1990s, shed light on the tensions and gender equality issues running through wrestling's access to the Olympics. The entry of female wrestling into the Olympics shows the difficulties faced by FILA in breaking through the power system based on the hierarchy existing between the wrestling styles, within a context where the IOC held great power of persuasion, even constraint, and influenced the orientation of sporting policies, particularly from the perspective of greater equality.

KEYWORDS: women's wrestling, Olympic Games, IOC, FILA, gender equality

Following a vote setting the number of Olympic disciplines at 25 on 12 February 2013, the IOC took the decision to exclude all styles of wrestling - including free-style, Greco-Roman and women's wrestling - from the list of Olympic sports. This resolution caused an earthquake within the international community of the discipline which had been included in the Olympic Games since 1920, as well as intermittently from the first event in 1896 to that of 1920 (Liotard & Groenen, 2008). The vote likewise suspended the brief inclusion of women's wrestling in the Olympics, integrated in September 2001. Following the action of key actors, leaders, and sympathizers of all kinds in the *Save Olympic Wrestling* movement, the 125th IOC Session, held in Buenos Aires from 7 to 10 September 2013, finally decided on temporarily maintaining wrestling in the Olympic programme for the Games in 2020 and 2024. Still further, the

initial suspension served as a lever of change for FILA's¹ perspective on gender equality, one of wrestling's shortcomings vis-à-vis the criteria established by the IOC (IOC, 2012).

Consequently, wrestling as a "bastion of masculinities" (Davis & Louveau, 199; Duret, 2015) in terms of the history of its federation and feminization, offers a rich context for observing and analyzing inequalities between men and women within the practice of a sport (Dunning & Maguire, 1995).

Historically, women's wrestling became structured in France from 1971, first in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region before spreading throughout the whole country and then developing internationally on the initiative, mainly, of Frenchman Michel Dusson, FILA's General Secretary since 1982 and President of the French Wrestling Federation (FFL) from 1979 to 1990. French actors in the field, such as athletes and federation leaders, thus played a key role in the institutionalization of this style and its international dissemination (Jomand, 2020). In 1987, the officialization of a female-specific style, women's wrestling, distinguished it from the men's practice.

Since 2001, Olympic wrestling has thus included three styles: two for men with Greco-Roman wrestling, where wrestlers are only allowed to attack the upper body, and freestyle wrestling, where wrestlers can attack any part of the body, and a specific style for women, women's wrestling, based on freestyle wrestling with the prohibition of the so-called double headlock technique. The integration of women's wrestling was evidence of FILA's consideration of women within a process that contributed to increasing the number of female wrestlers worldwide.

Reconstructing the history of women's wrestling therefore makes it possible not only to enrich academic knowledge on the feminization of sporting practices, but also to shed light on the debates surrounding their entry into the Olympics (Savre et al., 2009; Schultz, 2015; Maddox, 2020) and the related underlying issues. Such dynamics should be understood, inter alia, within the context of changes in Olympic policies regarding equality, at least from a quantitative standpoint (Chovaux et al., 2017), and the Olympic Movement's normalization power, as well as the integration of these changes into FILA's actions and policies. Equality is therefore deployed and observed at different levels, not only in sporting accessibility and representativity in governing bodies, but also in media visibility.

Whilst the quantitative feminization (Zaidman, 2007) of wrestling marked a turning point, this analysis has brought to light persistent stereotypes showing that facilitating access to practice did not erase discriminatory treatment. The Olympic competition is indicative of this: twelve weight classes for men against six for women since 2016. This difference stems from the fact that women's wrestling developed as a specific practice, built on the myth of female fragility and quite distinct from free and Greco-Roman wrestling styles (Jomand et al., 2020). Moreover, this style appellation symbolized a differentialized vision where strong injunctions for aestheticism and femininity were at work

1 The *Fédération Internationale de Lutte Amateur* (FILA) became United World Wrestling (UWW) on 9 September 2014 in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), with the aim of "modernizing" the Federation.

(Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo, 2018). The history of wrestling reveals the assigned gender roles faced by women wrestlers: whilst their practice was subject to specific regulation adapted to their presumed fragility, it also excluded them from Greco-Roman wrestling (Jomand, 2020). As a result, a hierarchical relationship persisted between styles, and consequently gender categories².

From this perspective, the study has shown that for FILA to be more than a mere spectator of change, it had to overcome the resistance of some of its members between the mid-1990s and September 2001, so that women's wrestling could become an Olympic discipline. In a similar fashion, FILA had no choice but to obey the rules since the IOC held normative, as well as judicial and disciplinary powers vis-à-vis sportspeople and leaders affiliated to the Olympic Movement (Gasparini, 2000), not to mention the power to maintain, or not, a sport's Olympic status. The Olympic Movement's coercive power over federation activities had moreover already been experienced by the wrestling community at the 1921 Olympic Congress in Lausanne, during which the IOC required the creation of FILA in its contemporary form, handling only wrestling issues (Strömbäck, 1987).

The IOC-FILA correspondence housed at the IOC archives proved particularly useful for understanding this history³. In addition, interviews were conducted with actors within the wrestling world⁴, in particular with FILA's General Secretary since 1982, Michel Dusson. With FILA announcing it had no archive conservation policy, these interviews made it possible to "fill in the blanks" and "bring to life the history of women's wrestling" (Duclert, 2002) by going beyond the key moments and events, and analyzing and interpreting them in the same way as other archives (Descamps, 2005).

The institutionalization of women's wrestling thus occurred amid tense relations between FILA and IOC, especially regarding the fact that two styles for men were already part of the Olympic programme. The concessions made by FILA, in particular concerning the number of weight classes in the Olympic freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling events, and its adaptation to IOC policies, were therefore instrumental in the entry of women's wrestling into the Olympics. Consequently, while the feminization of wrestling was stronger after its inclusion as an Olympic sport, this quest nonetheless failed to finalize the quantitative and qualitative feminization of the practice.

1. CREATING A STYLE FOR WOMEN BEFORE THE OLYMPIC CONCERNS

Women initially adopted the existing styles of freestyle and Greco-Roman. Their practice of freestyle wrestling became structured in Calonne-Ricouart from

² Gender categories refer here to the regulatory categories in sport: "men" and "women".

³ The IOC Archives are composed of digital reports from sessions, executive board (EB) meetings and a number of working group (WG) minutes, as well as correspondence from FILA (classification CIO FILUTTE-FILA-CORR, PROGR, PUBLI) and documents sent by national wrestling federations. We also managed to gain access to archives after 1986, which allowed us to consult discussions concerning the inclusion of women's wrestling. Correspondence began in 1926.

⁴ 25 interviews were conducted as part of a thesis on the history of women's wrestling (Jomand, 2020). For this study, the interviews with Michel Dusson, Daniel Robin, Martine Poupon and Lise Legrand shed light particularly on the internationalization of the discipline and its entry into the Olympics, on account of their respective role and involvement in the processes.

1971, before spreading throughout France, and then to neighbouring countries such as Belgium and Germany (Jomand, 2020). France can thus be considered as the centre from which wrestling developed internationally. In Scandinavian countries, it was the Greco-Roman style that was historically preferred by women, notably in Norway where a small number of exhibitions were organized from 1972, before it began to gain structure in 1979 (Gundersen, 1996). The first international meetings were autonomously set up in Europe, such as the freestyle event between Belgium, Norway and France, held in Tourcoing on 3 April 1982 (Curby & Jomand, 2015). In 1985, competitions in each style took place in parallel with the Freestyle World Wrestling Championships (Budapest, Bulgaria) and the Greco-Roman World Wrestling Championships (Kolbotn, Norway). The style of “women’s wrestling” would only be defined officially in 1987.

1.1. FILA chooses a unique style for women’s practice

This decision is still being questioned and debated today, and the appellation of wrestling styles continues to be a burning issue. In 2015, the name for women’s practice went from “*Female Wrestling*” to “*Women’s Wrestling*”. Yet, a number of news items on FILA’s website mentioned “women’s freestyle” and “men’s freestyle” in 2013-2014 (Condron, 2014). Such appellation corresponded to that used on the IOC’s website which referred to “freestyle” that could be practised by men and women alike (IOC, undated). The transition from women’s wrestling to women’s freestyle appeared not to be directly linked to female wrestlers’ femininity, but rather to an activity practised by women or men. The name “freestyle wrestling” was considered to be the least influenced by the gender system (Parini, 2006) and was intended to refer to both women’s and men’s practice without using male or female qualifying adjectives to describe it.

However, this effort regarding the name did not appear to be sustained over time nor diffused to national federations, particularly the FFL, where three separate distinct styles remained. During our exchange, Daniel Robin⁵ confided that a style could not be structured on the sole grounds of a single different technique. His use of “freestyle practised by women” when he was commentator at the 2016 Olympic Games (D.Robin, personal communication, 26 August 2017) attested to the stakes of the discipline’s name, with the term being used in the competition visuals of all the Games. Daniel Robin thus agreed with IOC directives but not with the International Federation’s uses. In a similar fashion, the inlays in television broadcasts presenting the categories, female wrestlers, and the event were named differently depending on the competition: *Women’s Wrestling* was used during the World Championships in 2017 and 2018, while *Freestyle Women* or *Women’s Freestyle* was preferred at the Olympic event⁶.

5 Daniel Robin (1943 - 2018) was a two-time Olympic freestyle and Greco-Roman medallist in Mexico in 1968, World Champion in 1967 and European Champion in 1968 in freestyle, former Vice President of the French Federation of Wrestling and Associated Disciplines, *Fédération Française de Lutte et Disciplines Associées* (FFLDA), Sporting Director for wrestling for the 2012 London Games, and commentator at the Games in 2012 and 2016, among other things.

6 For example, Athens 2004 <https://youtu.be/ewHAev54Qkg>; Beijing 2008 <https://youtu.be/3ePsOsZTxxwU>; London 2012 <https://youtu.be/NkdiyQFFcw>; World Championships 2017 https://youtu.be/pj8u5RM_V1M; World Championships 2018 <https://youtu.be/FO3j0k247Y4>.

Debates over generalizing Robin's phrase occurred within both FFL and UWW. The tendency was no longer to suggest a form of "subpractice" that would place female wrestlers on the fringes of "the sporting order" (Barbusse, 2016). This was not only symbolic but also conveyed a true commitment to recognition and equality. Yet, the decision to retain three wrestling styles was also indicative of politico-sporting stakes and aimed primarily at maintaining Greco-Roman wrestling as part of the Olympic programme.

The difficulties experienced by Nenad Lalovic, FILA/UWW President since 2013, to open Greco-Roman wrestling to women, showed that gender roles were still very present in the minds of certain actors in the field. "*We probably have to modify the rules a little bit for women. To avoid some positions*" (Owen, 2015). Female wrestlers should continue to be excellent athletes and conform to feminine characteristics (Lachheb, 2008; Theberge, 1995), which distanced them from Greco-Roman wrestling. Concerns were many in number and rooted in stereotypical representations of what women could and could not do. The first resistance lay in the supposed weakness of the musculature of women's scapular belt, an idea based on the opinion of FILA's physicians (M.Dusson, personal communication, 11 July 2014). Another argument concerned the aesthetics of the female body. Greco-Roman wrestling only used the upper body, leading to the fear that the female wrestlers' figures (wide torso and slender legs) would shake up traditional norms of femininity (Courcy et al., 2006). A further fear was linked to modification of the bust which should be shapely and "non-muscular" according to aesthetic norms (Froidevaux-Metterie, 2020). An additional reason fuelling federation discourse, both in France and abroad, was the need for a higher number of female wrestlers in each category to improve the global standard. Nonetheless, choosing the unique style of "women's wrestling" did not prevent FILA from exchanging with the IOC from the mid-1980s.

1.2. The first year groups of female wrestlers and how FILA structured women's wrestling

In 1985, when the first international wrestling commission for women took shape, women's wrestling was mentioned in IOC archives for the first time, in the *Charte sur les perspectives de développement de la lutte jusqu'à l'an 2000* (charter on development perspectives for wrestling to the year 2000) (FILA, 1984). In this charter, the discipline was lost amid numerous other lines of development concerning all styles and age groups. It appeared as just one novelty among others (Sambo, young people, etc.). For FILA, the aim was to deal with the competition from combat sports and martial arts:

Women's interest in wrestling, born in urbanized and industrialized parts of Europe, is certainly the dawn of a new era for our sport. This phenomenon opens new perspectives for our work and shows possibilities for developing wrestling within a new demographic group previously not addressed. Currently, women's wrestling is growing on an equal footing in countries like Norway, France, Belgium, Spain, and others. There is no reason for FILA to curb this interest; on the contrary, the decision was taken to encourage women's wrestling at the last FILA congress (FILA, 1984, p. 27).

The reference to development “on an equal footing” drew attention to the situation in France, in both quantitative – 9.88% of practitioners in 1984 - and qualitative terms, since female wrestlers in the country did not hold the status of high-level athletes or have good training centres, and only a few national gatherings (Jomand et al., 2020). Feminization was a long process which played out on many levels (Jomand, 2020). Equality was in the making, but as a long-term process in France, where the number of practitioners has failed to rise since 1991, oscillating between 20% and 25%. In the eyes of FILA, the institutionalization of women’s wrestling was inevitable, nothing opposed it, and it should even be supported. Despite that, the dominant discourse within the international federation considered women to be weaker than men, therefore justifying the adaptation of the sport in line with their capabilities which, as a result, also required them to remain feminine (Theberge, 2006). It was not only the comments made by journalists, leaders or coaches, expressing themselves individually or on behalf of local and national organizations, which supported this take, but also a federation policy based on a differentialist and essentializing conception. FILA moreover pronounced these principles in the 1984 Charter:

Women’s wrestling is a new perspective that opened for us at the end of the 20th century, a perspective that requires moving in a deliberate direction and which should allow greater practice of our sport without overlooking a woman’s specific characteristics. We must therefore, in the foreseeable future, define the forms and content of women’s wrestling in the light of a woman’s psychophysical constitution. Women’s wrestling must contain every essential aspect of our sport, including training technology and wrestling rules, while emphasizing factors that will protect a woman’s beauty and grace (FILA, 1984, p. 27).

Use of the word “woman”, in the singular, implied a unique way of being a woman and, consequently, feminine (Connell, 1987; Courcy et al., 2006). According to the dominant FILA discourse, wrestling practised by women must therefore not alter two constitutive elements of femininity: beauty and grace (Liotard, 1995). The competitive practice of wrestling should avoid “denaturing” women’s bodies through the development of muscular and strong bodies considered too masculine (Hargreaves, 2002), thereby guarding against the spectre of virilization (Bohuon & Quin, 2012). This “psychophysical constitution” moreover also implied gender stereotypes regarding women’s presumed psychology: fragility, timidity, etc. as opposed to traits of pride, arrogance, and determination associated with men (Rudman & Glick, 2012). It was as if wrestling should be transformed to be compatible with a strong sense of femininity (Courcy et al., 2006; Zaidman, 2007). A similar approach can be observed in many other disciplines in the history of sport (Terret, 2005), as well as being adopted in other combat sports (Mennesson, 2005).

1.3. Women’s wrestling on the sidelines of the race to the Olympics: FILA’s strategy for defending the other styles

The correspondence between FILA and the IOC shows that requests for women’s wrestling to be included in the Games did not immediately follow the officialization of the style in 1987. In 1993, Michel Dusson announced, during an

interview for the magazine *Tomoë*, that the necessary conditions were not yet met, particularly regarding the number of nations (Kaminski, 1993) capable of sending female wrestlers to the Olympics. At the time, the IOC required a sport to gather at least 40 nations from three different continents (IOC, 1992) for it to be included in the Olympic programme, whereas there were only 22 countries at the 1992 World Championships in Villeurbanne. A further contextual element likewise hindered the Olympic quest of women's wrestling. During the Birmingham Olympic Session in 1991, IOC Vice President Vitaly Smirnov explained that the IOC had to resolve the problem of the very heavy Olympic programme. To do so, it was necessary to reduce the number of athletes to 10,000 and the number of officials to 5,000 (IOC, 1991). This increased the pressure on FILA, already engaged in heated debate concerning the existence of two Olympic styles of wrestling, and led to tension between the two organizations.

1.3.1. Wrestling styles behind IOC-FILA tensions

The programming of two wrestling styles at the Olympic Games is a topic that has been regularly debated in Olympic history for a number of diverse ethical, political and economic reasons. The 24th IOC Session in 1924 recognized the two styles after numerous debates led mainly by Sverre and Edström. As a member of the Swedish Olympic Committee organizing the 1912 Games, Edström had already raised lack of time and financial means as reasons for not allowing freestyle wrestling (IOC, 1911). Whether a welcome pretext or not, the rejection of violence in the field of leisure within Lutheran Sweden helps to comprehend such a position. Boxing was thus also banned and absent from the Olympic Games.

Such tensions reappeared during the Cold War, in the image of the correspondence between Roger Coulon, FILA President, and Avery Brundage, IOC President, in November and December of 1959. The exchange took place at a time when the Soviet Union was looking to increase its influence in international organizations (Parks, 2013). After making it clear that he was not against wrestling per se, Avery Brundage then explained ironically that: *"I think Greco-Roman wrestling is only half wrestling. I don't expect you to agree, however, and I hope that the Wrestling Federation will not someday want to introduce wrestling with one arm and a leg"* (Brundage, 1959). The origins of both protagonists can, however, help to understand their different stances. Avery Brundage was from the United States of America, a country where freestyle wrestling held an important place, particularly at university, whereas Roger Colin was from France, the birthplace of Greco-Roman wrestling (Loyer & Loudcher, 2018). He was also president of a federation largely dominated, from a sporting point of view, by Eastern countries with significant results that were of importance in the geopolitical context of the time (Vonnard & Quin, 2017). Avery Brundage's approach did not entail any consequences, however, for Greco-Roman wrestling, since the proposal generated "an uproar leading the IOC to retreat in good order ..." according to Gaston Meyer, Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper *L'Équipe* (Meyer, 1964, p. 181). Tensions escalated again in the late 1970s, when FILA expressed

its wish to include Sambo (IOC, 1977). Sambo is a fighting style created in the USSR, which is practised on a combat mat wearing a sambo jacket and which allows submission techniques (Gorbylev, 2010). As proven by the correspondence between FILA President Milan Ercegan and IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch (Ercegan, 1980), this approach did not intend to include women, even though Sambo was the first combat discipline to have men and women in the same international multisport competition: the 1983 Pan American Games (Lenskyj, 1986).

Although structured around the regular organization of world championships since 1990, the entry of female wrestling into the Olympics was more complex. In 1993, FILA once again preferred to defend the place of Greco-Roman wrestling during a commission meeting rather than officially proposing the inclusion of women's wrestling. After justifying his position, Milan Ercegan stated, in a letter dated 27 July 1994, that removing two weight classes from each style would make it possible to reduce the number of medals to be awarded by 12, while hoping that other sports would follow suit: "If the remaining sports were also objective and united in reducing the number of events, there would definitely be a new possibility to include certain other sports in the Olympic programme" (Ercegan, 1994, p. 2). Nevertheless, his goal was not to include women's wrestling but rather secure the place of Greco-Roman wrestling in the Olympics: "Just as I did the last time, I am again asking for your support in maintaining Greco-Roman wrestling as part of the Olympics" (Ercegan, 1994, p. 2). Milan Ercegan failed, however, to anticipate the change spurred by the Brighton Conference of 1994 which laid the foundations for the international expansion of women's sports through the continuous development of a more just and fair system regarding sports and physical activity. He remained a mere observer, before becoming unwillingly involved.

2. WOMEN'S WRESTLING, OPPORTUNITY OR NECESSITY FOR FILA?

It is complex and probably too hasty, even caricatural, to conclude that FILA's change of stance was solely linked to Olympic stakes and IOC pressure. Nonetheless, a letter from Milan Ercegan implied that the process of including women's wrestling in the Olympic Games was the result of decisions taken at the 105th IOC Congress held in Atlanta, from 15 to 18 July 1996. Following this Congress, the IOC modified its policy in favour of women and, in 1995, it created a new International Working Group (IWG) on "Women and Sport". The report produced by the IWG's President Anita Defrantz⁷ and included in the minutes showed that the Group was not merely a hollow shell. It pointed to the need to feminize organizations and stated that "the programme of the Olympic Games must contain an equal number of women's events, disciplines, and sports" (IOC, 1996b). There were no official requirements, but feminization of the executive bodies within both the IOC and International Federations (IF) was recommended.

7 An IOC member, she participated in numerous commissions, including the Executive Board and the programme for women and sport from its creation (1995-2014), as well as being the only female candidate in history to the IOC Presidency (2001).

The Olympic Charter was modified, and the IOC took on a new role to “strongly encourage, by appropriate means, the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures, particularly in the executive bodies of national and international sports organizations with a view to the strict application of the principle of equality of men and women” (IOC, 1996f, p. 10). This same Charter underlined the admission requirements for a new discipline: “only sports widely practised by men in at least seventy-five countries and on four continents, and by women in at least forty countries and on three continents, may be included in the programme of the Games of the Olympiad (IOC, 1996f, p.68).

FILA had to meet these requirements to be able to claim women’s wrestling as its third Olympic style. However, the conditions under which the requirements had to be fulfilled became increasingly tougher: in 1958, 25 practising countries were needed for a sport to be put forward for inclusion, whereas 20 had sufficed in the previous charter (IOC, 1958). In the 1972 Charter, a distinction was drawn between men and women for the Summer Olympic Games, with 40 countries being necessary for sports practised by men and 25 for those practised by women (IOC, 1972). In 1982, the number of countries increased by ten for men and women alike, in addition to the required representation of a third continent for women’s international competitions. This trend was part of the globalization of sport (Sage, 2010), supported by the IOC.

The archives of different sessions and executive commissions showed that the question of judo practised by women was both raised and settled prior to this date. The relatively fast integration of female judokas into the Games thus occurred in a context that was different from that of wrestling. It was part of the wish to internationalize the Olympic movement in the same way as men’s practice (Niehaus, 2006) and to conquer the Asian market, particularly by means of other sports (Moussset et al., 2021). With this in mind, steps were taken even before the organization of the first World Judo Championships in 1980. The question had in fact already been addressed during the 81st Olympic Session in Montevideo in April 1979 (IOC, 1979). Traces of the debates on integrating women’s judo, as a demonstration sport, can be found in the records of the 1980 Executive Board meeting in Moscow (IOC, 1980). In 1983, judo practised by women complied with the admission requirements (25 countries were sufficient for a female event to be eligible), although difficulties persisted regarding the number of weight classes for the demonstrations during the 1988 Seoul Olympics (IOC, 1983), as well as at the 1992 Barcelona Games where the discipline was officially introduced into the programme.

Wrestling leaders, who were advocating for the Olympic integration of Sambo at the same time (Ercegan, 1994), failed to grasp both the stakes of including women in their sport and those of equality in its development and legitimization in the eyes of the IOC.

2.1. Delayed entry of women’s wrestling into Olympic debates

In September 1996, less than ten years after FILA’s officialization of women’s wrestling, the first Olympic inclusion request was addressed to IOC Sports Director, Gilbert Felli (Ercegan, 1996). It was resubmitted for the Sydney Games

in 2000. In its correspondence, FILA listed the eight points meeting the IOC's requirements, in particular the fact that women's wrestling was now practised in 56 countries, over 5 continents, and had been happening for 15 years in Europe. It also specified that events in the different wrestling styles were organized in distinct locations during the World and European Championships, de facto separating men and women. For FILA, this positive and clearly presented argument was conducive to the application's acceptance: no mixed male-female events to make it possible for any delegation to participate. However, justifying the separation of men's and women's styles could also signify a desire to mark the difference of each style, or even maintain a certain form of hierarchy between them. The 1989 World Championships in Martigny, Switzerland, stood as an exception by holding Greco-Roman, freestyle and women's wrestling in the same place. However, and this is still the case today, each style had its own dedicated competition day, even though the tournaments were held in the same host location. This separation was legitimized in terms of regulations by the fact that the national delegations were different. In the February 1998 edition of the magazine *Lutte Info*, the issue was raised by a club president asked about the inclusion of female wrestlers. FFL President Jean Michel Brun responded by referring to logistical constraints:

"The International Wrestling Federation (FILA) must first agree to group boys and girls together in the same events", declared Erick Mellier, President of La Ville-aux-Dame's (37) Wrestling Club, to which Jean Michel Brun, President of the French Wrestling Federation, replied: "To have boys and girls competing at the same time during world championships or other major competitions would cause complex organizational problems. Between age groups and weight classes, we would never manage." (Cavaillès, 1998)

Yet, during a judo competition, boys and girls generally competed on the same day.

A further argument put forward by FILA in favour of women's wrestling rested on the guidelines of the IOC's own "Women and Sport" International Working Group, which recommended the creation of specific commissions for women's practice. In this respect, a women's wrestling commission had, in fact, been created as soon as FILA integrated women's wrestling. The commission was composed, at the time, of Michel Dusson (France), its president; Denise Picavet (France), secretary; Christer Persson (Sweden), Ove Gundersen (Norway), Joseph Raeymaekers (Belgium), Tomiaki Fukuda (Japan), and Mohamad Benslimane (Morocco). With the exception of Morocco, all the represented countries were leading initiatives for the development of women's wrestling. The International Women's Wrestling Committee gathered for the first time in Rome, in December 1984, with the aim of voting on the rules for governing it. During the second meeting, in Roubaix on 30 March 1985, the inclusion of women's wrestling in FILA's official competition schedule was adopted, as was the proposal to combine women's wrestling events, *Festivals Mondiaux*, with the existing world and continental championships for men.

In the letter addressed by FILA to Gilbert Felli on 4 September 1996, the Federation highlighted the effort undertaken to reduce the number of weight classes from eight to six for women's wrestling. Appendix 9 of the IOC's

Executive Board Minutes from Lausanne in September 1996 (IOC, 1996d) recommended reducing men's categories from ten to eight and allowing six women's categories. While the inclusion of women's wrestling was refused (Felli, 1996), IOC members nonetheless accepted the proposal to reduce the number of weight classes for men. Although the report did not allow access to the content of the debate, since the supporting appendices were not made available by the IOC, the reading of the Olympic Programme Commission's report reminds us of the IOC's rationale: "*If women competitors are added in one sport, this number must be included in the quotas of that particular sport*" (IOC, 1996c). This argument appears to be the main reason for not including women's wrestling in Sydney. The total number of classes for the three styles would have increased, despite the reductions proposed by FILA for the men's styles (20 men's classes in 1996 would have become 16 for men plus 6 for women, in other words a total of 22 for Sydney).

During the subsequent Olympic Programme Commission meeting, the argument still prevailed: "*Mrs Lindberg noted that, for example, the introduction of women's wrestling would not cause an increase in the number of athletes if the IF reduced the number of male competitors accordingly*" (CIO, 1996e, p. 3). These sources lead us therefore to believe that if FILA's proposal had rather aimed to achieve the balance required by the IOC, women's wrestling may well have been able to enter the Olympic programme in Sydney 2000. FILA was however not yet ready to have fewer male wrestlers so that it could include female wrestlers and meet the IOC's requirements for limiting the number of athletes, titles, and medals in its aim to curb the organizational costs of the Olympiads. The FILA was still trying to preserve - if not win - weight classes, and consequently medals, while simultaneously advocating gender equality. Such a position did not, however, hold up within the framework of the Olympic policy.

2.2. FILA's push for the Olympic entry of women's wrestling intensifies

Faced with this refusal, FILA maintained constant pressure for the integration of women's wrestling at the Sydney Olympic Games, even though IOC leaders tended to lean towards the Athens Games scheduled in 2004. The interview granted by Michel Dusson to the magazine *Tomoë* in 1997 served to prove this and confirmed FILA's efforts to meet the criteria:

FILA suggested that the IOC integrate women's wrestling into the Olympic Games as early as the following Olympics in Sydney. FILA decided to reduce the number of weight classes for both men and women to avoid overloading the Olympic programme. Unlike other disciplines that have already applied for their entry into the Olympic programme, FILA proposed a deep overhaul of the organization of its competitions. Unfortunately, the proposal was turned down and women's wrestling will not, in all likelihood, be a part of the Sydney Olympic Games (Kaminski, 1997, p. 14).

The Secretary General's words suggested that the IOC's position could change. However, he indicated that increased participation in world championships, for both nations and athletes, would be necessary. Although the Federation showcased the practice of women's wrestling in 57 countries, only 25 of them were represented in major competitions. Michel Dusson underlined the fact that

women's wrestling was in a vulnerable situation in comparison with other sports: "essentially for economic reasons since, in most countries, women's wrestling suffers from a lack of subsidies for its development" (Kaminski, 1997, p. 14). In certain countries, women's practice of wrestling remained complex as a result of both cultural norms and the discrimination suffered by the wrestlers. Michel Dusson highlighted the opening-up of wrestling to the African countries of Tunisia, Senegal, and Benin. He added that "there is one country of Muslim tradition and two Sub-Saharan countries. Such affiliation is very interesting since it demonstrates women's interest in our sport, regardless of culture or religion" (Kaminski, 1997, p. 14). Although the argument of religion, notably Islam, as an obstacle to women's practice was raised during the interview with Michel Dusson (personal communication, 11 July 2014), he emphasized the development of some countries such as Turkey, a country with a great wrestling tradition, in particular oil wrestling – *Yağlı güreş* – (Krawietz, 2012). Other Muslim countries would be favourable to combining practices on the condition that women's competitions took place "behind closed doors". Muslim women therefore faced greater resistance and more restrictions. The latter could be material or financial affecting their ability to train, as well as social, such as intra-family conflicts or religious pressure (Pfister, 2010; Benn et al., 2012; El Faquir, 2017).

Analyzing the exchanges between the IOC and FILA, however, offers another perspective on the ambition to integrate women's wrestling since FILA and national federations also sent letters opposing the IOC's position on women's wrestling. Raphaël Martinetti, FILA's Vice President, had no choice but to comply with the IOC's requirements and choices regarding the non-integration of women's wrestling in January 1997, while nonetheless pointing out that it fulfilled the criteria. Although he contested the decision and put forward the argument of the reduced number of weight classes, it was not to make a case for women's wrestling or demonstrate a sincere will to defend this practice (Martinetti, 1997), but rather to underline the fact that this did not give all nations the same opportunity to participate. Despite the numerous exchanges on the subject, the situation remained unchanged for the Sydney Games.

The double game of FILA's leaders continued in 1998: "Regarding women's wrestling, FILA first requested its inclusion in the 2004 Games, but is now seeking its integration in 2000. The crux of the matter is being able to include female wrestlers in the existing quota so as to avoid creating an extra quota" (IOC, 1998a, p. 27). The Federation continued to propose the inclusion of women's wrestling at the Sydney Games, all the while positioning itself for the 2004 Games, and was sufficiently active to find itself mentioned in half of the reports published in 1998 (CIO, 1998b).

IOC lobbying by different national federations failed to move any boundaries: "We have also recently observed an increase in letters of support for the integration of women's wrestling. As this represents an increase in the number of participants, we maintain our proposal to reconsider the matter for the programme of the XVIII Olympiad, Athens 2004" (IOC, 1998b, p. 143). The IOC stood firm. The global number of participants, all sports combined, must remain below 10,500. In FILA's letters to Juan Antonio Samaranch, a reminder of this number always featured as part of the response. This correspondence mostly

highlighted historical data as proof of the discipline's importance over time. Its history thus appears as a way of legitimizing the practice, resting on its "authenticity" and heritage (Épron, 2008). A letter dating from 1997 and co-signed by Milan Ercegan and Michel Dusson, for example, included two pages dedicated to the history of wrestling (Ercegan & Dusson, 1997). Moreover, Dusson signed the letter as President of the International Women's Wrestling Commission and not as FILA's Secretary General.

2.3. Women's wrestling supported by IOC members

A further argument put forward by FILA leaders rested, in fact, on the IOC's position concerning women's access to sport. "All these young girls practising wrestling are calling for the right to participate in the Olympic Games and that is why, in line with your policy in favour of women, I would like to reiterate our request for women's wrestling to be added to the programme of the Olympic Games" (Ercegan & Dusson, 1998). Communication between them continued until the early 2000s. Notwithstanding, the debate was not included in the minutes of the IOC Executive Board meetings. It was not until 2001 that women's wrestling was mentioned again: "Mme Defrantz points out that there remain only two sports in the Summer Games programme which do not include women: boxing and wrestling. Women's wrestling meets all the criteria for its inclusion in the programme; for this reason, she hopes it will be considered for the Games in Athens" (IOC, 2001a, p. 25).

IOC Sports Director, Gilbert Felli, turned the argument on its head by retorting that "there are also two disciplines in which only women participate: rhythmic gymnastics and synchronized swimming. Nonetheless, the proposal to include women's wrestling in the programme will be studied" (IOC, 2001a, p. 26). This remark should be interpreted in the light of the key position of the sports director in the IOC's organization chart, a highly political position at the interface between federations and national Olympic committees, as well as in close contact with Juan Antonio Samaranch.

Although his words did not close the door on the integration of women's wrestling, the reply showed the difficulty of conceiving equality between women and men. Rather than defending progress for women, which would close a historical gap and rectify the imbalance in the way women were treated, Felli preferred to oppose two sociohistorical situations that were hardly comparable and largely unfavourable for women referring, in so doing, to sports for which there had hitherto been no request for men's participation.

The exchange likewise demonstrated the difficulty encountered by the IOC in driving change regarding the place of women (Smith & Wrynn, 2014). It was thanks to the IOC's "Women and Sport" IWG, and more especially Anita Defrantz, that the inclusion of women's wrestling was brought back to the executive board table.

Finally, in September 2001 and with four weight classes, women wrestling's entry into the Olympic programme was approved by vote following FILA's agreement (IOC, 2001c). Yet the fact remained that the principles of equality between women and men were not applied to women's wrestling, which had fewer

weight classes than men's wrestling in the 2004 Olympic Games. Three of the women's weight classes usually present in competitions were not represented at the Olympics, although the seven men's classes competed in each of the styles. A hierarchy was consequently established for women between Olympic and non-Olympic weight classes.

It is difficult to understand the reasons behind this choice. A possible interpretation emerged through the words of Franco Carraro – President of the IOC Olympic Programme Commission in 2001 – concerning the sport's influence: "It is not possible to change attitudes or public opinion vis-à-vis certain sports. Wrestling, for example, has many athletes but fails to generate particularly strong interest" (CIO, 2001b). Media attention may well therefore be one of the reasons behind the direction taken by the IOC (Barney et al., 2004). Yet, by including female wrestling, the IOC succeeded in reducing the number of men's weight classes from ten for each style in 1996 to seven in 2004, then six for both men and women from 2016. Allowing fewer weight classes for the first women's Olympic competitions was likewise the case for boxing (Smith & Wrynn, 2014). In the 2012 Games, only three classes were present (flyweight, lightweight, middleweight), although there were ten classes for women in the 2012 World Championships. Women from seven weight classes were therefore unable to participate in the Olympic Games. A counterexample existed however in judo since there were seven weight classes from the sport's first inclusion in the official programme in 1992.

In spite of such dissonance, women's wrestling made its entrance at the Athens Olympic Games in 2004, thereby gaining Olympic legitimacy. Its inclusion led to a rise in the number of female participants and countries represented during competitions, and contributed to raising the standard and level of homogenization in the sport (Curby & Jomand, 2015). The process was long compared to the experience of other disciplines such as judo or boxing (first World Championships in 2001, first Olympic Games in 2012), yet quick in the end considering the initial steps. In fact, only five years elapsed between the first request in September 1996 and its approval in September 2001. Such speed proved that from the moment the IOC implemented its resolute equality policy, based on the recommendations of its "Women and Sport" IWG, particularly following the 1996 Lausanne Conference which "encourages the IOC to continue its work towards the objective of having an identical number of women's and men's events in the Olympic programme" (CIO, 1996a), FILA had no choice but to conform. The level of correspondence and its content showed that the question of defending women's wrestling was finally being taken more seriously into consideration. Under the presidency of both Ercegán and Martinetti, the wish for equal treatment was visible.

3. CONCLUSION

The inclusion of women's wrestling in the Olympics and the preceding debates bear witness to the hierarchical relationships between styles, and consequently genders, existing within FILA. This analysis thus makes it possible to grasp the

role played by the perceived differences between genders and the power relationships they sustained (Scott, 1988) in the entry of wrestling practised by women into the Olympic Games. The study likewise reveals the IOC's normative power over the sporting movement, both implicitly due to the Olympic status and its repercussions for example, and explicitly in the requirements regarding feminization, number of athletes, etc. The disagreement between the two organizations initially focused on the place of Greco-Roman wrestling and, to a lesser extent, the integration of Sambo, thereby hindering women's arrival in the 1990s. The work carried out by Anita Defrantz crystallized the pressure that the IOC could exert over the validation or not of a discipline's inclusion in the Games, as well as underlining the fact that the approach aimed at ensuring equal access for both women and men was a strong and key argument for driving change.

The temporary removal of wrestling in 2013 showed that such openness was, however, not sufficient for meeting the IOC's requirements and questions wrestling's Olympic and sociohistorical trajectory over the following decade. The study likewise attests to the fact that feminization of wrestling in the Olympic Games remains incomplete to this day. Greco-Roman wrestling continues to be the only discipline in the programme barring women. Correspondence between IOC and FILA, combined with the statements of French actors involved in the process, proved to be pertinent sources for understanding the history of women's wrestling's entry into the Olympics. For all that, it would be worth pursuing and adding to this research, namely by interviewing the key actors from the IOC, the "Women and Sports" IWG, FILA/UWW and foreign national federations, who contributed or were witness to the discipline's integration into the Olympic programme; as well as by studying the correspondence on the matter between these national federations and FILA/UWW. Lastly, the work undertaken encourages us to extend the study beyond 2013, focusing particularly on the case of Greco-Roman wrestling.

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