

Runners, To Your Marks: Why Women's Speed is Sprinting Ahead! – Trend Analysis

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Abstract

This paper attempts to show how women in the world are gaining momentum in sports, just as they are doing in many other fields. Opportunities to compete in many field games as team players, and track athletes have been increasing in the world; this has greatly galvanized a tremendous number of women to move forward to train and compete in many sports meets, including the Olympics. They are performing better and more efficiently as athletes and the world is being forced to change its opinion of women as being not good enough to be considered as equal with men athletes on the sports arena. This paper tries to analyze the new trend among the women athletes to train harder and beat their own and others' records and rise up as fine, strong athletes worthy of accolades.

Keywords: Elite Training, Women's Marathon Record, Sprinting Events, Increased Speed, Gender Equality, Female Speed

Women Are Getting Faster!

“SHE'S DONE IT! “LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE FASTEST PERSON IN THE WORLD!” It is the year 2156 and the Olympic 100 meter dash has just been won by a woman. This may be a stretch, but it is undeniable that women are getting faster, and are just as capable in elite training as men. Over the last thirty years, women's speed has been improving at high rates, and often, at rates faster than men. Since 1955 the women's marathon record has improved by 61%, while in the same time period, the men's record has only improved by 18% (Hilgers). With numbers such as these, female athletes demand recognition. Women are improving in

speed in a wide range of events, and as the next generation of Olympians begins to take over, light is being shed on the immense improvements women are bound to experience.

Why Are Women Getting So Fast So Quickly?

So why are women getting to move so fast so quickly? There are many reasons. In 1928, all women's events longer than 200 meters were eliminated from the Olympics, and it was not until 2008 that women were given the opportunity to compete in all the same Olympic events as men on the track (Epstein). Rumors of the incapacity of women to train without fatal injury ran rampant until recent years. In 1967 Kathrine Switzer was the first woman to run the Boston Marathon, only to have women banned from the race the following years until 1972 (Jones). Clearly, female athletes have exceeded their critics' predictions, as well as the few supporters' expectations, and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future.

With Greater Speed in Sprint Events

In both long distance and sprinting events women are making their mark by leaps and bounds. Women and men have the closest times in the 1500m and 100m races. Women are only 6.3% slower than men in the 1500meter race, and 6.6% slower in the 100meter dash (Fish). This is amazing for a gender that was previously considered incapable of the most basic athletic activity. Even more interesting, before participating in any athletic training, women's performances ranged from 46 to 82 percent slower than the men's, but after training, the majority of the women out-performed the untrained men. When comparing the ability of men in the early 1900s with women in the same events today, women out-perform the men easily (Fish). Florence Griffith Joyner, the current women's 100m world record holder, set her record in 1988 with a time of 10.49 seconds. This time she would have beaten gold medalist Bobby Joe Morrow in the 1956 Melbourne Games. In 1985, Marita Koch won the 400m dash with a time of 47.6 seconds, matching that of hero Eric Liddel from the 1924 Paris Games (Fish). These facts make one wonder, had women started to train at the same time as men, how much closer would they be today? Back up the starting date of women in athletics, and women would be much closer in times with men today than they currently are. These facts help illustrate just how much women have improved, and how capable they actually are. Women have seen an increase in speed due to an increase in opportunities, an increase in participation, and an increase in the social acceptance

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of athleticism among women. It is easily seen that gender equality and female speed form a dependent relationship; as one improves, so does the other.

Increase in Opportunities

The increase of opportunities for women to compete in athletics has played a large role in the increase of speed. Obviously, if one cannot compete, one cannot improve. Donna Lopiano of the Olympic Review says “when women have been given the opportunity to perform in sport, their achievements have eliminated myths that have previously prevented their full participation.” One of these myths is that participating in a marathon will cause a woman’s uterus to collapse, which has been proven false time and time again as more and more women compete in marathons. The number of women participating in athletics as opportunities open up has been consistently rising; however, their speed increase rates have not. In the 1950s, the increase in women’s speed was incredibly steep, and although it is still rising it is no longer as steep. This problem has been surmounted from the fact that women were just getting into competition and training, changing their bodies entirely. (Epstein) Women were excluded from Olympic participation until 1896, and in the 1900 Paris Games, less than 1% of all the competitors were women. One hundred years later, at the 2000 Sydney Games, 38% of all athletes were women. (Lopiano) The direct association of women's speed increase with the number of opportunities available, makes it clear that the only thing that was previously holding women back from training to success was not the uterus, but a closed competitive arena.

Other Reasons and Myths

However, not everyone believes the only thing that held women back was the lack of opportunity. Right before the start of the 2014 winter Olympics, where women were allowed to compete in the ski jump for the first time, Alexander Arefyev, the Russian men’s ski jump coach, said “if a man gets a serious injury, it’s still not fatal, but for women it could end much more seriously. Women have another purpose—to have children, to do housework, to create hearth and home.” (Epstein) Maybe he was threatened, since women have actually been known to fly farther than men in numerous occasions in ski jump due to women being generally lighter. Sadly, this type of thinking is not as uncommon as it should be. The pseudoscientific ideas that bar women from competing are not singular to ski jump. In the 1970s there was much research

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done to show that if a woman ran a marathon, she would lose her reproductive capabilities. Much of this so-called research was actually myth, and around 2000 the guidelines for exercise during pregnancy flipped, and exercising while pregnant is now recommended. In fact, British marathoner Paula Radcliffe was celebrated for training well into her third trimester and then leading the 2007 New York Marathon ten months after giving birth. (Epstein) This shows that the majority of the reasons for keeping women out of competitive athletics were really due to a lack of information, or in fact, incorrect information, not a lack of female ability as some may wish to believe.

Increase in Participation

Not only have women seen a sharp increase in opportunities to prove themselves capable of increased speed, but also of increased participation. This participation is not only taking place at the Olympic level, but also at the high school level, where it is most important. It takes about fifteen to twenty years to train an elite athlete, so intense athletic development during a woman's high school years is extremely advantageous (Lopiano). Thirty years ago, one out of twenty seven girls in high school played a varsity sport. Today the number is better than one in three (Fish). In partnership with the increase in high school girls' sports, there have also been developments in women's college sports. According to Gina Pauline of the Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, there are currently 9,274 women's NCAA teams, an increase of 2,928 teams in the past fourteen years. These numbers are no fluke, women are consciously going out for sports more often, and a large part of this is because there are simply more opportunities open to them. This growth in participation has led to an increase in competition, on all levels, forcing women to work harder in order to win. There is proof of this in Minnesota's Track and Field State High School meet. Over the past five years, the qualifying times for girls have been lowered consistently, due to girls getting faster and crushing the old qualifying times, making it more competitive as girls fight for state spots to compete. Yet, each year, every state spot is still filled, showing girls are getting faster and meeting these raised requirements. In contrast, the qualifying times for the boys are actually being raised, making it easier for boys to compete at state. (MSHSL) If this continues, in the next five years girls will be qualifying for high school state meets at the same times as boys, something never imagined twenty years ago. Overall, the expanding participation at all levels of women's track has given a rise to

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competition, and in turn to the intensity of training, and therefore, speed. (MSHSL) As more girls begin to participate, it changes not only the dynamics of the sport, but also the social dynamics.

Impact of Changing Social Dynamics

These changing social dynamics have also had an impact on the increase in women's speed. The world is changing, and has come far from the 1950's ideal of a submissive housewife. The new social acceptance of women training to succeed, and of the athletic woman overall, has been imperative to the speed increase of women. Today, such athletic superstars as Tennis player Serena Williams, and Olympic Hurdler Lolo Jones have helped develop this social acceptance of the strong woman. Both women are incredible, strong athletes, capable of beating men in their respective sports. Both women also hold numerous advertising campaigns through dealings with major corporations. Serena Williams even has her own clothing line. However, the average woman still faces much discrimination both from society and from within herself. For decades, women were discouraged and undertrained as athletes. (Hilgers) Mike Fish, of The Atlanta Journal, states that "where it once was taboo for women to display muscles, weight-training has come into vogue." Society not only impacts the image a woman may hold as acceptable, but also the level of personal effort and motivation she may see as acceptable for individual improvement. For example, Kolata says that according to Dr. Vonda Wright, an orthopedic surgeon at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, women are often under the impression that they should not put much effort into runs. However, once they reach outside of their comfort zone and become more competitive, their times improve dramatically. As women begin to feel that it is socially acceptable to be athletic and push themselves, inhibitions fall away and ultimately speed increases.

Closing the Gender Gap

The increase of women's speed and athletic ability helps close the gender gap worldwide in numerous areas beyond sport. Lopiano explains that as women's achievements in sports increase and contribute to national pride, beliefs that the female athlete is less worthy of support, less productive, or less important, are challenged, and the myths supporting gender inequality in sports begin to disappear. This effect of female athletic success leading to gender equality in

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sports can also be easily seen in other aspects as well. As more and more women participate and succeed in sports, more women are also put into positions of power in the sports world. For example, in 2012, Augusta National Golf Club allowed two women as members, for the first time in its eighty year history. This is a milestone for women in business, because it sets the standard for other exclusive groups to accept women as members (Pauline). The increase of female speed helped make this possible, and has helped and will help level the playing field in gender equality in many different arenas (theoretical and sports related) worldwide.

For Girls' Inspiration Worldwide

The overall increase in speed makes stars out of female athletes, and for girls' inspiration worldwide. As much as participation levels are a cause for the increase in speed, they are also for effect. According to Lopiano, as successful female Olympians are featured and shown in the media, such images of successful, highly skilled women create their own momentum, increasing the aspirations of females to participate in sport. Again, women such as Serena Williams and Lolo Jones are prime examples of famous female athletes as global inspirations. Like a cycle, as participation and competition rise, speed and female athletic success follow. As female athletic success rises, so does participation, inspiring thousands of girls to follow in these new heroes' footsteps.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that women will one day reach the same speed as men. This is due to physiological reasons and the advantages testosterone provides men, along with the fact that it is easier for men to pump blood and oxygen throughout their body much quicker and stronger than women (Epstein). However, that does not mean women will stop improving. According to Susan Brink, a staff writer for The Los Angeles Times, women will have a few more years of steep increase, since they entered the competitive arena later. Women have proven they are capable of elite training and intense regimens, and they will not stop. The boundary of human improvement is infinite; however, as humans get closer and closer to perfection, records will no longer be smashed, but tweaked (Brink). So how did women get to where they are today, approaching perfection at a rate that is exceeding the men? This did not just happen overnight, but rather through a cycle of opportunities and participation, partnered with the overarching growing social

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acceptance of female capability. As women continue to improve athletically, so will female sports participation and gender equality overall. Fish puts it best as he simply states “female athletes are gaining”, and whether it is on the track or in the conference room, they won’t stop.

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