‘Our Sport’: The Fight for Control of Women’s International Athletics

Abstract
The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) initially ignored women’s sports. The efforts of female leaders and organizations, particularly Alice Milliat and the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI), instead paved the way for women’s inclusion in Olympic athletics. The success of the FSFI’s Women’s Olympic Games in 1922 not only served as a catalyst in this regard, but challenged men’s authority over international sport generally and international athletics specifically. Whereas IOC officials questioned the suitability of physical activities for women, IAAF officials recognized the FSFI as a threat to the IAAF’s position as the singular and supreme organizer of international athletics. In response, it adopted various strategies to gain control over the women’s sport and its organizing body. The IAAF’s decision to support the inclusion of women’s events in the Olympics thus stemmed more from its quest to consolidate authority than from a desire and intention to advance women’s sport. The IAAF slowly gained control over women’s athletics, with lasting repercussions on the progression of women in the sport, as both athletes and administrators.

Key Words: women’s athletics; IAAF; Sigfrid Edström; Alice Milliat; gender dynamics

Women’s athletics debuted at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. Female Olympians had previously competed in a handful of Olympic sports considered acceptable for women; however, athletics – the most popular, and perceived to be the most gruelling, of Olympic endeavours – had remained off limits to women since the inaugural 1896 Games. The 1928 Olympics featured five athletics
events for women – 100 metres, 800 metres, 4x100 metres, discus throw, and high jump – and twenty-two athletics events for men.

The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF),\(^2\) which was established in 1912 to organize men’s athletics, initially ignored women in the sport. It was thus the efforts of female leaders and sports organizations, like Alice Milliat and the *Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale* (FSFI), that paved the way for women’s inclusion in Olympic athletics. In 1922 the FSFI, led by Milliat, addressed women’s exclusion from the Olympics by hosting the first Women’s Olympic Games, in which athletes from five countries competed in eleven athletics events. The success of these Games is often cited as the catalyst for women’s eventual inclusion in the 1928 Olympics. While this is undoubtedly true, the actions and motivations of certain key stakeholders during this period remain underexplored. In particular, the significant role of IAAF President Sigfrid Edström in the early management of women’s athletics, and the impact of his approach on the long-term progression of women’s athletics, has not been fully appreciated. There is general consensus amongst researchers that leading figures in the IAAF and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) believed women’s athletics should be governed by the same male-led organization as men’s athletics.\(^3\) One of the most widely distributed narratives regarding the slow acceptance of women into athletics suggests that Milliat struck a deal with the IAAF and the IOC: in exchange for the eventual inclusion of women’s athletics in the Olympic Games, she agreed to drop the word ‘Olympics’ from the title of the FSFI event. The narrative continues that while Milliat and (male) IAAF and IOC officials initially agreed upon ten women’s athletics events, the latter did not uphold their end of the bargain, adding only five events in 1928.\(^4\) Other explanations suggest that Milliat agreed to drop the ‘Olympic’ label in exchange for official recognition of the FSFI by the IAAF. This, in turn, allowed the IAAF, as the sole IOC-recognized International
Federation for athletics, to petition for the addition of women’s athletics events to the Olympic program, with the FSFI able to maintain oversight over the organization of women’s athletics.\(^5\) Regardless of the specific nature of the agreement, the compromise resulted in women being excluded from all influential positions in international Olympic sport for many decades.\(^6\)

Within these existing accounts, however, there has been insufficient emphasis on how the success of the FSFI’s Women’s Olympics challenged men’s authority over international sport generally and international athletics specifically. Further historical examination reveals that Edström viewed the FSFI as a threat to the IAAF’s position as the singular and supreme organizer of international athletics. Although he and his fellow IAAF officials were not keen to invite women into their organization or their sport, they also did not want a parallel international governing body to exist. Edström therefore appointed various committees and commissions to determine the best way to incorporate women into athletics. Comprised largely of male IAAF members, these committees and commissions embraced patriarchal assumptions and posited that men, and by extension the IAAF, were the appropriate overseers of athletics. Their ensuing proposals therefore outlined ways for the IAAF to slowly gain control over the women’s sport and its female leaders. The IAAF used women’s sport as a tool to expand and entrench its exclusive authority over international athletics.

This process makes clear that the IAAF’s decision to support the inclusion of women’s athletics in the Olympics did not stem primarily from a desire and intention to advance women’s sport. Rather, the IAAF, led by Edström, assumed control of the women’s sport in an effort to preserve its status as the leading governing body of international athletics. By taking control of women’s athletics from the FSFI, the IAAF slowed the progression of women’s athletics and severely curtailed the number of women in leadership positions – trends that continue to this day.
The IAAF’s Response to the Development of Women’s Sport

The development of women’s athletics during the early twentieth century provoked the IAAF and its president to take some initial steps to control the women’s sport and its female leaders. Edström accepted the inevitability of women’s participation in sport and focused his attention on how it could be used to bolster the position of the IAAF. This stance differed from the more resolute stance of the IOC’s leadership, which outright opposed the participation of women in athletics. The IAAF’s more pragmatic and strategic response to women’s sport set the stage for its eventual takeover of the FSFI.

The founder of the modern Olympics, French Baron Pierre de Coubertin, was against women’s participation in high-performance sport. He considered female competitors at the Olympic Games ‘impractical, uninteresting, unsightly, and (...) improper’. Coubertin worried that allowing women access to the Olympic Games – even in sports widely practiced by, and considered appropriate for, women such as tennis and swimming – would eventually lead to women also competing in other sports. In 1912 he argued against opening the floodgates, asking if ‘[i]n the future, perhaps, will there be women runners or even women football players? Would such sports, played by women, constitute a sight to be recommended before the crowds that gather for an Olympiad? I do not think that any such claim can be made’. Coubertin’s sentiments mirrored the western social norms of the time and hampered women’s inclusion in the Olympics.

Against Coubertin’s wishes, women participated sporadically in the early Olympic Games. Yet when it came to the first general discussion about women’s formal participation during the 1914 Olympic Congress, the IOC President opposed their inclusion entirely. On this matter, Coubertin had the backing of the powerful delegates from the United States and France. The
American Olympic Committee voted to oppose women’s participation in the Olympics, having previously agreed to prohibit US women’s inclusion in events ‘in which they could not wear long skirts’. The French Olympic Committee voted in the same manner, arguing that because the participation of women in sport was restricted to only a few countries, their participation in the Olympics conflicted with the aim of representation for all nations. In other words, it was a fairer policy to exclude all women than to include only a few.

However, Coubertin and his allies faced opposition from Australia, Germany, Great Britain, South Africa, and Sweden. Eventually, Coubertin’s proposal to exclude women entirely failed, despite his threat to resign if he was outvoted, and the Congress decided that the organizing committee of the Olympic Games could determine in which events women could participate. Women were therefore permitted to continue participating in the Olympics in a handful of events.

The 1914 Olympic Congress was also a milestone for the IAAF. Having been founded two years earlier and comprised entirely of male members, the IAAF negotiated for control over men’s athletics. Edström, the IAAF’s pragmatic president, convinced Coubertin in 1914 of the need for a governing body of athletics and reassured him that it would not interfere with the IOC’s authority over the Olympics. Coubertin eventually shifted responsibility for developing and implementing sport-specific regulations, including eligibility matters, to the individual federations. This supported Edström’s primary aim of the 1910s and 1920s: to establish the IAAF as a leading international sports organization. To this end, he gathered a group of influential European and US men, all with extensive experience in the administration of athletics. Most of these men either disliked or ignored women’s athletics, believing the sport was not suitable for women.
Following the 1914 Olympic Congress, World War I halted the development of international sport, and at the same time altered conventional gender norms in certain countries. In many European societies, women assumed traditional male roles. This change extended to sport, with the establishment of women’s sports organizations in various countries. For instance, in 1918, the newly founded Austrian women’s athletic federation, led by men, staged the first national athletics championships for women. The following year, the German Athletics Association encouraged its clubs and regional federations to establish women’s sections. It was men, however, who were put in charge of these sections. The opportunities women gained in competition did not extend into administration.

Similar patterns emerged in North American sports. Following World War I, women’s participation in sport increased in both Canada and the United States. Yet the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada (AAUC) refused to accept female registrants, deeming the gruelling nature of athletics unacceptable for women. In the United States, the all-male leadership of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) initially barred women from participating in its events, including athletics. Female physical educators responded by offering their female charges modified versions of male sports; however, athletics remained off limits. Through industrial leagues and historically black colleges and universities, working class white women and women of colour stepped into the vacuum and excelled in the sport. However, like the AAUC, the AAU eventually assumed control, continuing the pattern of male leadership over women’s sport.

The organization of women’s sport developed differently in France, establishing an alternative pattern for female oversight of athletics. A national federation for women’s sport – the Federation Societes Feminines Sportives de France (FSFSF) – originated from France’s first independent women’s athletics club, Academia, founded by men in 1916. Yet unlike the AAUC
and the AAU, the FSFSF included women in its leadership and elected Milliat as its General Secretary in 1918. Soon thereafter, Milliat was elected to the FSFSF Presidency and by 1922 she had transformed the male-dominated leadership into an all-female team, an uncommon composition for the time. She also defended the FSFSF against attempts by the men’s national athletics federation to subsume the FSFSF as a branch, thereby setting an important precedent for future female leadership.

Milliat simultaneously spearheaded the quest for women’s athletics at the international level. After Coubertin denied her request to allow women’s participation in athletics at the 1920 Olympic Games, Milliat decided to stage an independent international women’s athletics competition in Monte Carlo in March 1921. The success of the event led to the foundation of the FSFI, the first international federation for women’s athletics, in October 1921. Athletics then had two international governing organizations: the IAAF, for men and composed entirely of men, and the FSFI, for women and composed of both men and women.

As much as the IAAF was not keen to oversee women’s athletics, it did not want a second international athletics organization to exist. In 1921, Edström learned from the President of the Belgian Athletics Federation that not only were women competing in athletics in several countries, but female leaders were developing an international federation for women’s athletics. He surveyed the issue and decided that the only suitable option was for the IAAF to assume control over women’s athletics. ‘It would be better if our Federation also governed the sport for the ladies’, he posited. Edström viewed the FSFI as a challenge to his federation’s authority.

His male IAAF colleagues agreed as they believed it was their prerogative to oversee women’s sport, or as Edström described, ‘handle the female athletes’. Without conferring with Milliat or FSFI representatives, the all-male federation assumed it was the rightful organizer of all
athletics. Thus, for the IAAF, the only remaining question was how exactly the oversight would be achieved – through a special organization, under the umbrella of the IAAF, or by the IAAF in its current form. Edström supported the latter option: ‘I see no reason why we cannot keep up the present organisation and simply recognise the fact that we also govern the sports for women.’ He asked Reichel to ‘point out to the leading women that we will ourselves govern the female sport’. Edström’s cavalier request for Reichel to ‘point out’ to the FSFI that his federation decided to govern women’s athletics illustrates the patriarchal assumption that men should fill any and all leadership roles. He and his fellow IAAF members believed it was their right and responsibility to control the development of women’s athletics. His flippant comment also suggests he assumed that the FSFI would simply acquiesce to the IAAF’s demands.

Unlike Coubertin, Edström did not reject women’s athletics entirely. His approach, by which the men’s international federation would oversee women’s athletics, was pragmatic and rooted in contemporary gender norms. Edström also wanted to protect the IAAF as the sole international organization for the sport of athletics. In order to explore the means of governing women’s athletics within the IAAF, he appointed a special committee in June 1922 to study the issue and report to the IAAF Council the following year. The committee was originally to be presided by Reichel and include Edström’s confidant Harry Barclay (Great Britain), Fr. Wydemans (Belgium), Allan Muhr (France), and four ‘ladies’, two French and two British. Yet only two women ultimately joined the four men: Sophie Eliott-Lynn (Great Britain) and Milliat. Edström reluctantly added Eliott-Lynn and Milliat, writing to Barclay that ‘I should by very thankful if you are not too much influenced by the French women’. Among male athletics officials, then, women sport leaders were viewed as unimportant and inconvenient.
Despite this development, Milliat and the FSFI continued to organize women’s athletics, pushing the IAAF into further action. By the end of 1922, Edström perceived the actions of the ‘French women’ as an increasing threat, arguing that ‘they are working most energetically to keep the Women’s field and track events out of our Federation’. He was displeased that ‘French women’, presumably the FSFI members, did not readily agree to yield control to the IAAF. He also saw the continued visibility of the women’s governing body as a challenge to the authority of the men’s federation. Edström concluded that ‘We must consider what is best for our sport and act accordingly’.34 His rhetoric is striking. In Edström’s view, athletics was ‘our’ – the men’s – sport, and to be governed by ‘our’ – the men’s – federation.

**The IAAF’s Concern with Protecting the Olympics**

This possessive view of the sport led to further concerns among IAAF officials about the impact of women’s athletics on the Olympic Games, where men’s athletics featured prominently. Two particular concerns, shared by the IOC, shaped the IAAF’s response to the FSFI: the latter’s use of the ‘Olympic’ label and the growing size of the Olympic Games. These concerns – one about prestige and the other about practicalities – motivated Edström and the IAAF to take further actions to control women’s athletics.

The IOC claimed the word ‘Olympic’ was its exclusive property. While its officials were bothered by the use of the title by all others, whether men’s or women’s sports organizations, it found the latter’s use of the word particularly galling. In line with the view of certain IOC leaders that women were not suited for sport, they disdained the attachment of the ‘Olympic’ label to a female sporting forum. Therefore, they protested the FSFI’s repeated use of the label during the 1922 IOC Session in Paris. French representative Count Justinien Clary discussed his unsuccessful
attempts to remove the term from the 1921 *Jeux Olympiques Féminins* in Monte-Carlo (a multi-sport event organized by Milliat and forerunner to the FSFI’s Women’s Olympics), as well as from an upcoming women’s event in Vichy. Based on such ‘abuses’, IOC members passed a resolution stipulating that ‘Olympic’ referred solely to the quadrennial global event organized by the IOC. Similar to the IAAF’s displeasure with the existence of a separate governing body of athletics, the IOC disliked being associated with different sporting forums.

As the FSFI’s Women’s Olympics grew in size and popularity, the IOC’s disapproval of the women’s use of the Olympic label did too. Milliat continued to use it in the 1922 and 1923 *Jeux Olympiques Féminins* in Monte-Carlo, as well as in the 1922 Women’s Olympics in Paris. During the 1925 IOC Executive Board meeting, members again addressed the situation. They asked the international federations, including the IAAF, to ensure that the term be reserved solely for the Games organized by the IOC and specifically prohibited its use by the FSFI. The IOC’s fixation on the FSFI’s use of ‘Olympic’ suggests that male sport leaders did not believe women were worthy of the prestige associated with the Olympic Games or, similarly, that the women’s use of the label diminished its value.

Edström, having lamented the use of the word by the FSFI as early as 1922, hardened his position when the IOC requested the IAAF’s help. For example, when the FSFI asked the Belgian Athletics Association for assistance in organizing the 1926 Women’s Olympics scheduled to take place in Brussels, Edström immediately informed the national association that, due to the IOC’s prohibition, it must refuse to grant the requested aid. However, he simultaneously acknowledged that the IOC did not bar female leaders from organizing an international sporting event. Edström’s concession indicates that his issue with the FSFI in the mid-1920s centred more on the title of the women’s event than the event itself. As a member of the IOC Executive Board himself,
Edström cooperated with the IOC in ‘protecting’ the Olympic brand. Further, as he later informed the Belgian Athletics Association, Edström was ‘obliged to defend’ the IOC and to forbid all IAAF-affiliated national federations from sending athletes to the Women’s Olympics.¹⁰ In other words, Edström did not share Coubertin’s resolutely negative view of women’s athletics; however, he recognized that good relations with the IOC Board were essential for the growth of the IAAF.

The frustration of the IOC leadership with the women’s use of the ‘Olympic’ label eventually provided the FSFI with some leverage in the organization of athletics – but not before concerns about the size of the Olympic program halted the expansion of women’s sport. Coubertin was not only concerned with women’s participation in the Olympics as a matter of principle and prestige, he also fretted about the size of the Olympics. This provided a justification for limiting the addition of women’s events. During the 1921 and 1924 IOC Sessions, members discussed the growth of the Olympics; the disapproval of most male officials toward women’s sport made it an easy target for reduction. For example, during the 1924 IOC Session, members discussed women’s inclusion and concluded that it would be an ‘extraordinary burden’ to add more women to the Games. The Session therefore voted to maintain the existing program of events for the 1924 Olympics, which did not include women’s athletics.¹¹

While Edström generally supported the IOC’s efforts to stop the use of the ‘Olympic’ label for non-IOC competitions, he more proactively endorsed the IOC’s desire to reduce the scope of the Olympics. He argued that the growing size generated significant expenses that unfairly encumbered participating countries. In a 1924 letter to the IAAF Council, he suggested that the Olympics remove all team sports and retain only the ‘simplest’ of activities – those involving jumping, running, swimming, or walking.¹² Edström’s strong support for the general principle of reduction set the stage for future limitations on the women’s program of events. Although the two
issues – exclusivity and practicality – coalesced in the mid-1920s, his unequivocal support for reducing the size of the Games seems to have thwarted the efforts of FSFI and female athletes more than his perfunctory defence of the term ‘Olympic’. The latter, however, is what brought the IAAF and the FSFI into conversation via a Special Commission for Women’s Sport.

The IAAF’s Special Commission for Women’s Sport

The IAAF responded to the IOC’s concerns with more committees and commissions. Based on the recommendation of the committee established in 1922, the IAAF created the Special Commission for Women’s Sport in 1924 to oversee women’s athletics. From Edström’s perspective, the formation of this group officially signalled the IAAF’s assumption of power over the FSFI. Milliat disagreed. She joined the Special Commission in 1926 and feuded with Edström about the governance structure of women’s sport throughout the remainder of the decade. Still assuming it was the rightful overseer of athletics, the IAAF responded by slowly weakening the FSFI’s claim to women’s sport.

The special committee (established in 1922) provided its first report to the IAAF Council in July 1923. Based on that report, the IAAF Council expressed the opinion that no separate federation for women’s sport should exist. In countries where women competed in athletics, the IAAF directed the corresponding national men’s associations to take charge.43 Assuming that the IAAF Congress would approve this strategy, the Council pressed ahead with implementing its position. Edström tasked AAU President William Prout in 1924 with crafting rules and regulations for the women’s sport.44 He selected Prout because of his experience hosting women’s athletics events in the United States. The AAU sponsored the first national track and field championships for women in 1923.
At the 1924 IAAF Congress, the IAAF’s takeover of women’s athletics was officially put in place pursuant to a four-part proposal by the IAAF Council. The membership agreed that the IAAF would govern, and establish international rules for, women’s athletics; that no athletics events for women would be added to the Olympic Games; and that the Council would appoint a special commission to govern women’s events. The IAAF Congress accepted the proposal and adopted a constitutional amendment to bring women’s athletics under its purview.

Pursuant to the fourth prong of the proposal, the IAAF founded the Special Commission for Women’s Sport to govern women’s athletics. The Special Commission was composed entirely of men: Prout, Wydemans, French representative Joseph Genet, Dutch representative H.N. van Leeuwen, and English IAAF Council member Harry J. Barclay. The FSFI, perceived as dangerous by Edström, was not initially represented in the new commission. In 1925, Edström added a male FSFI member who was also his friend, Swedish doctor Einar Lilie. Although the IAAF claimed to want female representation on the Special Commission, this did not become a reality until Milliat joined in 1926, albeit without voting power.

In what appears to be the first correspondence between the two, Edström wrote Milliat in January 1926 informing her that she could not use the ‘Olympic’ label for the upcoming Women’s Olympics, adding, seemingly as consolation, that he had appointed her to the Special Commission. While the available correspondence does not show an explicit quid pro quo – dropping ‘Olympic’ in exchange for inclusion in the Olympics, as some scholars suggest – it does imply that Edström added Milliat to the Special Commission to coax her into abandoning the prestigious title.

Moreover, it appears that neither Edström nor the IAAF ever promised a full slate of athletics events for women in the 1928 Olympics, as sought after by Milliat. In the initial letter to
Milliat in 1926, Edström expressed his hope that the IAAF could introduce women’s athletics in 1928 and concluded the correspondence by highlighting the importance of the Special Commission for Women. The group needed to confer and make recommendations on the most suitable disciplines, he explained, because the IAAF could only propose four events for women, due to the IOC’s prevailing reduction efforts. At no point in the IAAF minutes or Edström’s correspondence from this time period was a ten-event proposal mentioned. Instead, the FSFI requested a ‘full’ programme of ten events for the first time in August 1928. Edström’s letters to Milliat therefore contradict the widely held belief that the IAAF and the IOC promised Milliat ten Olympic events in exchange for the removal of the term ‘Olympic’ from her sporting competition, only to break the promise later by adding five. The Special Commission did discuss possible events for women prior to its first meeting, but the prevailing concerns about the size of the Olympics limited the group’s options, much to the frustration of Milliat.

The Special Commission met in person on March 3, 1926, in Paris. Edström, Genet, Prout, German IAAF member Karl von Halt, Waizer, and Wydemans attended, along with FSFI representatives Milliat and Major Marchant, a male English physical educator and prominent figure in the Women’s Amateur Athletic Association. At the meeting, the Commission concluded that only one organization should oversee all of athletics. For IAAF representatives, the male federation was the obvious choice. Edström argued that the larger size of the IAAF justified its position of power over the FSFI. An unspoken belief in men’s natural abilities to govern sport seems to have underpinned his stance; the IAAF members never considered the FSFI representatives as their equals and assumed their superiority in the field of sport. Taking over women’s athletics therefore reaffirmed what they understood to be the correct (gendered) social order.
Upon conclusion of the 1926 meeting, Edström happily informed the IAAF Council that the group ‘was of the opinion that there should be only one organisation governing the Women's Sports and invited the [FSFI] to join the IAAF.’\textsuperscript{56} He described the agreement to Barclay, who did not attend the meeting, as ‘unanimous’.\textsuperscript{57} The IAAF President viewed the meeting as successfully establishing the IAAF as the overseer of both men’s and women’s athletics. He assumed that moving forward, the Commission for Women’s Sport would organize athletics for women – with Milliat as president and FSFI representatives as members – under the IAAF umbrella. The Commission would also propose four events for the 1928 Olympics.\textsuperscript{58}

However, it was soon apparent that Milliat did not readily agree with this plan. Although Milliat’s letters are unavailable, it is nonetheless obvious from Edström’s correspondence that she was displeased. Based on Edström’s letters to certain IAAF members, it seems that Milliat’s most immediate concern was the requirement that the FSFI cease operations in all sports besides athletics. The Special Commission ‘invited the FSFI to give up its athletic work and at the same time invited the leading persons in its council to take charge of the women’s athletic sports within the IAAF’.\textsuperscript{59} In other words, the IAAF wanted the FSFI to oversee only women’s athletics (and no other sports), under the IAAF’s supervision. ‘She desires that her federation shall live in one way or another and be acknowledge by our Federation’, complained Edström to Barclay.\textsuperscript{60} Her refusal to acquiesce displeased the IAAF.

Another concern was the inclusion of women in the Olympics. Milliat was dissatisfied with the IAAF’s promise ‘to do [its] best to have the women’s sport part of the Olympic Games’. Milliat wanted guarantees, which Edström claimed he was unable to provide.\textsuperscript{61} Edström’s letters indicate a wariness regarding Milliat and an unwillingness to compromise. Edström repeatedly used the word ‘fight’ when discussing his interaction with the FSFI. For example, he told Barclay that if
'we can come to no final agreement with Madame Milliat and her friends, we will have to fight her Federation'. Edström passed this sentiment along to the IAAF. In a circular letter he explained that ‘the IAAF will continue to work independently and must energetically take the management of the women’s athletics into its own hands’. The seeds of discord between Edström and Milliat had been planted.

The Special Commission next met on April 29, 1926. Edström, Genet, and Wydemans represented the IAAF and Milliat, Marchant, and the Czechoslovak Vaclav Valousek represented the FSFI. The two factions offered different proposals for the governance of women’s athletics. The IAAF argued that only one federation should oversee both men’s and women’s athletics, ‘and that said federation ought to the be IAAF’. According to the IAAF’s proposal, the Special Commission would run women’s events. The FSFI ‘offered to conduct’ women’s athletics itself (instead of the Special Commission appointed by the IAAF) but to still ‘follow the rules of the IAAF’ – a slight difference in governance structure with significant power implications. In the IAAF’s proposal, the FSFI ceased to exist. Not surprisingly, at the 1926 IAAF Congress, the IAAF approved the IAAF’s proposal, which gave the FSFI the opportunity to organize women’s sport, but under the authority of the IAAF. This arrangement illustrates not only the adamancy of the male IAAF members’ that only one federation exist, but also their reluctance to truly incorporate women into the organization. Indeed, Edström confided in Barclay that he did not want to include women’s athletics: ‘Personally I certainly should like ladies to be out of it [the IAAF], but I cannot go against the wish of the Federation’. The IAAF also voted to propose that the IOC add five women’s events (100 metres, 800 metres, 4x100 metres, high jump, and discus) to the 1928 Olympics, in contrast to the twenty-two events available to men. Without much leverage, the FSFI begrudgingly agreed.
Despite the agreement, Milliat remained dissatisfied with the limited number of events for women. What was already a strained relationship between Edström and Milliat quickly deteriorated further. From the outset, Edström found women leaders in general, and Milliat more specifically, ‘troublesome and persistent’, and disdained their demands for women’s inclusion. He repeatedly chastised Milliat for her ‘tone’ and in letters to IAAF members described her actions as ‘on her high ways again’ and ‘on the war path’.  

By February 1926, just one month after Edström informed Milliat of her appointment to the Special Commission, he suggested removing her from it entirely. The increasingly stormy relationship between Milliat and Edström, and her refusal to acquiesce to his demands, soured the relationship between the FSFI and the IAAF. This downfall led to Edström and the IAAF assuming complete control of women’s athletics through a few final power plays.

**The IAAF’s Final Power Plays**

As Milliat continued to demand more opportunities for female athletes, her relationship with Edström soured. He found her demands bothersome and depicted her as unwilling to compromise. The deterioration of Milliat and Edström’s relationship provided the IAAF an excuse to wrestle complete control over women’s athletics from the FSFI. Thus, the 1936 decision of the IAAF to assume exclusive oversight of women’s athletics, and the subsequent folding of the FSFI that same year, was the result of calculated efforts by Edström to make the IAAF the sole recognized international authority for athletics.

By 1928 Edström was frustrated by Milliat’s refusal to hand over control of women’s athletics to the IAAF. His attempt to persuade her by offering her the position of head of women’s athletics within the IAAF had failed. However, Edström was confident that assimilation was
inevitable as it was increasingly occurring at the national level, including in countries where Milliat and the FSFI previously had strong support from women’s athletics organizations such as in Germany. Edström predicted that the majority of IAAF members would follow suit and unify women’s and men’s athletics, meaning the former would be incorporated into the organization governing the latter. In line with the IAAF’s view of the FSFI as a secondary organization, Edström viewed women’s athletics organizations at the national level as inferior to the men’s.

Edström actively encouraged this trend of assimilation. In 1927, for example, he urged the Belgian and Czech athletics federations to incorporate women’s athletics under the IAAF’s ‘one country, one association’ rule. Then, in 1928, he wrote to Barclay encouraging him to amalgamate women’s and men’s athletics in England. Edström explained that such a union would lead other holdouts to follow and thus ‘facilitate the solution of the whole problem’ of divided authority between men’s and women’s organizations. Edström did not mince words when exerting this pressure on Barclay, writing: ‘Everything depends on your country’. Edström also wrote to AAU President Murray Hulbert to encourage him to attend the upcoming FSFI Congress and propose that the FSFI join the IAAF. Edström’s correspondence reveals how he used his position as IAAF President and his extensive networks to pressure the FSFI into acquiescence.

As 1928 was an Olympic year, both the FSFI Congress and the IAAF Congress took place in Amsterdam around the time of the Games. At the opening of the IAAF Congress, Edström welcomed Milliat as a guest and expressed the IAAF’s collective expectation of her and the FSFI: ‘We hope that the good cooperation between the two Federations will continue and we are looking forward to the time to come, when Madame Milliat and her friends will unite with us completely’. When the IAAF Congress took a break for the Olympics, the FSFI held its Congress. Edström made a brief appearance, at the invitation of Milliat, who assured him of the FSFI’s friendly
collaboration. Edström expressed his hopes for continued good relations with the FSFI and for a full women’s program at the next Olympic Games, but reminded the FSFI that the decision was ultimately up to the IAAF Congress. When the IAAF Congress reconvened the following week, its membership voted to keep women’s events on the Olympic program for 1932, but rejected Milliat’s motion for a ‘full’ program of ten events, approving a program of only six events for women, compared to the twenty-three for men. Several delegates voiced particular opposition to the women’s 800-metre race, ‘which they thought too hard for women, this race not being an endurance competition but a long sprint’. Their concern about the gruelling nature of the race stemmed from conventional gender norms about the incapability of women to run distance events.

The decision about women’s athletics then moved to the IOC, where the question of women’s participation in all sports remained unanswered. Edström took full advantage of his position as both IAAF President and IOC Executive Board Member to influence this debate in the interests of the IAAF. His actions during the period between the 1928 and 1932 Olympic Games illustrate that he was still apathetic about women’s athletics, although he saw its incorporation as a means to maintain and increase the power of the IAAF in international sport. For instance, in April 1929, he presented the IOC Executive Board with a number of strategies for reducing the Olympic program, which included the elimination of women’s participation altogether. In other words, women’s exclusion from the Olympics was an option Edström considered, but only if applied to all federations. If women were allowed to participate in international competition at all, they must be allowed to participate in athletics. Otherwise, the place of athletics as the premier Olympic event was threatened.

It seems Edström considered the continuation of women’s sport inevitable and so, in an effort to gain control over it, convinced the IOC Executive Board to discuss the matter of women’s
participation in the Olympics with the international federations. In the meantime, however, IOC President Baillet-Latour put forth a proposal to prohibit women’s participation in the Olympics except in four (sufficiently ‘feminine’) sports, which did not include athletics. Upon hearing of this proposal, which was scheduled to be voted upon at the 1930 Olympic Congress, Edström again went to work behind the scenes.

He immediately wrote to Baillet-Latour, emphasizing that the proposal may ‘cause trouble’ with the IAAF, the federation ‘most loyal’ to the Olympic cause. Edström recommended either that women be excluded from all Olympic sports or that each federation decide whether women can participate in its own sport at the Games. These proposed alternatives reveal, again, that Edström’s did not support women’s participation in the Olympics per se, but rather saw it as means to secure greater control over international athletics by eliminating the FSFI. This approach was further clarified in a second letter to Baillet-Latour, sent the month before the 1930 Olympic Congress. In this letter, Edström repeated that it was a ‘great mistake’ to try to remove women’s athletics events from the Olympic program and warned that going through with this idea could lead to a ‘fight’ between the IOC and its ‘most faithful’ federation, the IAAF. He also pointed out that the Women’s World Games posed a real challenge to the IOC, which the IAAF could suppress if Baillet-Latour withdrew his proposal from the agenda. He emphasized that Milliat was ‘trying with all her power to carry on her Games with a similar ritual as the Olympic Games’ and could become ‘just as famous’. In other words, Milliat and the FSFI needed to be stopped. Edström positioned the IAAF, and its control of women’s athletics, as the solution to the challenge posed by the FSFI to the IOC. This challenge appears to have been mounting as the FSFI was ready to consider extending its Women’s World Games if the IOC decided to exclude women from the Olympic Games.
Just before the Olympic Congress, the IAAF Congress adopted Edström’s strategy. In May 1930, the Congress approved the Council’s recommendation that all IAAF delegates at the Olympic Congress should speak and vote in favour of women’s participation in athletics events at the Olympics. The IAAF Congress also agreed on responses to the possible outcomes of the upcoming vote. If the Olympic Congress voted to exclude women from all sports, the IAAF would abide by this decision; however, if the Olympic Congress voted to accept Baillet-Latour’s proposal and allow women to participate in some sports but not in athletics, the IAAF would withdraw men’s athletics from the Olympics. Delegates were instructed to inform the Olympic Congress of this boycott threat.82

Edström’s efforts paid off at the 1930 Olympic Congress, where, at the suggestion of AAU President Murray Hulbert, the members rejected Baillet-Latour’s proposal and voted seventeen to nine (with one abstention) to recommend the inclusion of women’s athletics in the Olympics Games to the IOC Session.83 A final decision was to be made at the 1931 IOC Session, taking into account the preferences of each international federation.84 In a letter sharing this new plan with Milliat, Edström noted, ‘I have no doubt, however, that they [the IOC] will agree to the programs adopted by the IAAF and our Federation will act accordingly’.85 Acting accordingly in these circumstances meant taking women’s athletics out of the hands of the FSFI. Indeed, soon thereafter, Edström suggested to the IAAF Council members that they consider amending the IAAF By-laws to give the IAAF control over all international athletics championships, including the Women’s World Games,86 the third edition of which had just taken place with great success.

In the months leading up to the 1931 IOC Session, Edström diligently worked to ensure the final vote would go his way. Knowing that he could not attend the Congress himself, he reached out to a number of IOC members and delegates, including those from Germany, Great Britain,
Latvia, and the United States, to vote for the maintenance of women’s athletics at the upcoming IOC Session. Edström also wrote multiple letters to Baillet-Latour, asking him to ‘moderate’ his position. He purportedly agreed in principle to ‘stop the women altogether’ but implored Baillet-Latour to ‘be fair’ and not be ‘favourable to one sport and unfavourable to another’. His final appeal asked the IOC and its President to return the favour given to it by the IAAF and its President:

The [IAAF] has always been faithful to the Olympic cause. We have never gone against your wishes. We have no European, nor American or any other Championships. We have only the Olympic Games. We do not compete with you in any way. We cooperate with you. Why should you then go against our wishes? I am sorry I cannot be present in Barcelona and I now leave the decision in your hands.

When the question finally came to a final vote on April 25, 1931, Edström’s efforts paid off once again with a sixteen to three vote in favour of including women’s athletics at the 1932 Olympic Games. However, this vote did not, as Edström had perhaps hoped, satisfy Milliat and the FSFI to give up control of women’s athletics. Rather, a few months after the IOC vote, the FSFI was already looking ahead at ways to expand its influence. For instance, it designated one of its members to maintain close contact with the organizers of the 1936 Olympic Games in order to address questions of women’s athletics. Moreover, it considered adding more sports to the Women’s World Games. While Milliat noted that this would be a difficult task, in part because it may involve international federations abandoning participation in the Olympics, she agreed to make efforts in this regard. The FSFI was planning expansion, not retreat.
The FSFI also continued to press the IOC and IAAF for a full women’s program in the Olympics. However, IOC President Baillet-Latour was still outspokenly against women’s participation in athletics altogether. In this divided context, Edström asked the IOC to allow women’s participation in athletics generally, without raising a specific program of events. The IOC members voted again, in May 1934, by a slim majority – eleven to nine – in favour of women’s continued participation in Olympic athletics. Shortly thereafter, Edström wrote to Milliat to inform her that the German athletics federation had proposed that the IAAF alone govern women’s athletics. He warned her that if the IAAF Congress decided to accept this proposal, the agreement between the FSFI and the IAAF, by which the former governed women’s athletics by delegation of the latter, would be terminated.

Milliat brought the situation before the FSFI Congress and explained that the delegation agreement arose from the IAAF’s efforts to deprive the FSFI of women’s athletics in light of the success of the first Women’s World Games. Now that the FSFI had grown considerably, she said, the IAAF wished to appropriate the fruits of the FSFI’s labour. One of the German delegates, Heinrich Voss, took the opportunity to defend the proposal that his own federation had made to the IAAF, saying that the German athletics federation’s goal was not to hurt the FSFI but simply to obtain a full women’s program at the Olympic Games. In light of this discussion, the FSFI Congress unanimously took the position that it would give up the Women’s World Games if and when the full program of women’s athletics events offered at those Games was offered at the Olympics and the FSFI had a direct representative on the IOC. Milliat was apparently doubtful that this would happen, noting that the IOC was increasingly hostile toward women’s participation in athletics. She also emphasized the FSFI’s duty to protect and promote the idea of Women’s
Olympic Games through ongoing discussions with federations dealing with different women’s sports.  

The proposal was discussed at the IAAF Congress in August 1934, where the IAAF Council, led by Edström, recommended that the Congress accept the German federation’s proposal. According to the German federation, an IAAF takeover provided women’s sport higher status before the IOC. It also relieved the organizational and financial burdens on national associations, which would no longer participate in two sets of world championships and pay membership fees for two federations. Yet according to Milliat, the IAAF ‘had done nothing for women’s sport and was not interested in it’ and so the real question was whether the women would have a full program in the Olympics – a decision which she believed to be within the discretion of the IAAF Congress. She asked the Congress to consider, ‘above any consideration of circumstances or personalities, the best way of promoting a developing women’s sport’. Given the complexity of the question and the diversity of opinions, the Congress decided to revisit the issue at the 1936 Congress and, in the meantime, to establish a joint IAAF-FSFI Committee to study the matter thoroughly and endeavour to come to an agreement. However, the respective leaders of the IAAF and the FSFI were no longer interested in cooperating.

Increasingly displeased with the reluctance of the IAAF and the hostility of IOC, Milliat tried a new approach: She wrote to the IOC asking that all women be excluded from the Olympic Games as they would have their own quadrennial games, including all women’s sports, governed by the FSFI. This would facilitate women’s leadership over women’s sport. But the IOC declined to consider this proposal on the basis that this was something to which the international federations concerned, including the IAAF, would have to agree. It was thus rejected.
Edström then appointed himself and two of his friends, Genet and von Halt, to the IAAF side of the joint committee charged with addressing the question of the IAAF’s potential takeover of women’s athletics. He had no real interest in negotiating with Milliat, explaining to Genet that he thought a discussion with her on this topic was ‘completely impossible’. Rather, he planned to simply arrange a short meeting with Milliat to tell her that the IAAF intended to manage women’s athletics. Edström arranged a meeting for June 27, 1936 and, foreshadowing what was to come, told Milliat that since women’s athletics was being integrated into (men’s) national athletics associations, ‘it would be advisable that the [FSFI] give up its work’ and that he hoped to be able to promise her an extension of the Olympic program in return.

Milliat refuted Edström’s position. She described his assertion that there was a general tendency toward women’s athletics being governed by the men’s national athletics associations as ‘quite wrong’. Instead, she explained, ever since the creation of the FSFI, the ‘tendency is much rather the opposite’ and argued that Czecho-Slovakia was the only federation where the men’s federation had incorporated the women’s federation. She accused Edström of using this ‘misinformed’ view as an excuse for the IAAF to take over women’s athletics when, in fact, his reasons were ‘elsewhere’. She agreed that the upcoming meeting was therefore necessary to come to an agreement in ‘the best interest of women athletics’.

In the end, Edström was too ill to attend the meeting with Milliat so he gave Genet specific instructions to renounce the 1926 agreement between the IAAF and FSFI that allowed the latter to govern women’s athletics via the Special Commission. To satisfy Milliat as much as possible, whom Edström warned could be unfriendly, the IAAF would advocate for an expanded (not full) Olympic program. He advised Genet, however, not to make a commitment as to outcome since the
final decision would rest with the IOC, which Edström knew was uneasy about women’s athletics.104

While Edström advised Genet on how to cut Milliat and the FSFI out of athletics, he was also directly doing so himself. He informed Milliat in June 1936 that there was no need for an FSFI delegate at the upcoming IAAF Congress: ‘As I have pointed out to you before, we must take the women’s sport in our own hands’.105 In light of what she saw as Edström’s forceful attempts to keep her, and thus the FSFI, away from the IAAF Congress, Milliat concluded that the IAAF would stop at nothing to destroy the FSFI.106 For this reason, as she later explained to the FSFI Congress, she agreed with Genet to put Edström’s takeover proposal to a vote before the Congresses of the IAAF and the FSFI. She managed to include a few conditions in the text of the proposed agreement: that the IAAF would recognize the validity of FSFI accredited world records; that the IAAF would remain committed to the eventual attainment of a full program of women’s athletics events at the Olympics; and that, since a full program could not be guaranteed for the 1940 Olympics, the fifth Women’s World Games would be held in 1938.

After the meeting, Genet reported to Edström that Milliat had resigned herself to the finality of the IAAF’s decision; she would not oppose it, especially as she was retiring from the FSFI due to ill health.107 In short, as Genet explained, Milliat and her colleagues agreed to ‘disappear’ on the conditions set out above.108 Edström expressed to Genet his pleasure with Milliat’s willingness to act according to their wishes and his hope that the IAAF Council could avoid her conditions at the Congress.109 In particular, he was against the continuation of the Women’s World Games for a fifth edition.110

Milliat subsequently retired and Edström got his wish. At the IAAF Congress held on August 10, 1936, he and the other two IAAF members of the joint committee – the FSFI members
were excluded from the meeting – presented the agreement negotiated between Edström (via Genet) and Milliat. However, they immediately proposed certain amendments. They suggested that the IAAF do its best to extend the women’s Olympic program to nine events and that the work of the FSFI finish that year, ending the Women’s World Games.111 The IAAF Congress voted in favour of this proposal, Edström having effectively convinced them that Milliat and the FSFI were a nuisance. The IAAF thanked the FSFI for its fifteen years of work and took the sport from there, while the FSFI, with Milliat no longer taking the lead, gave up the fight.112 The FSFI met for the last time on August 6, 1936, and dissolved afterwards. A proposal to continue as an organization only for team sports was rejected by the delegates.113

**Men’s Control of Women’s Sport**

After a brief hiatus due to World War II, the Olympics resumed in 1948. At the London Games – the first Olympics with the IAAF in full control of women’s athletics – women participated in nine athletics events. Men, by contrast, participated in twenty-four. The IAAF did lobby for additional women’s events in later years; however, progress was slow. For example, without the Women’s World Games, female athletes did not again compete internationally in the 800 metre race or the pentathlon until 1960 and 1964, respectively. Moreover, the women’s program offered by the IAAF did not include an equal number of events as the men’s until the 2017 World Athletics Championships, while the Olympic program remains unequal.

The IAAF takeover also diminished female leadership in athletics. Whereas the FSFI had always included men and women in its leadership positions, the IAAF was initially male dominated, and has remained largely so for over a century. The IAAF has never had a female president and did not elect a woman to its council until 1995. In 2019, the IAAF rebranded as
World Athletics and elected its first female vice president, along with six other female Council members, pursuant to recently adopted mandatory quotas.\(^{114}\) These constitutionally enshrined quotas require that the Council be comprised of an equal number of women and men in 2027. Such mandated measures are necessary, at least in part, because the IAAF banished women from its highest ranks almost a century ago. The longstanding trend against women’s participation in athletics leadership continues to trickle down to national federations, where, according to recent figures, only seventeen (8.1%) of the 209 national member federations have a female president.\(^{115}\) The long-term effects of the IAAF’s elimination of the FSFI, and its female leadership, can therefore not be understated.

While the IAAF once described its takeover of women’s athletics as a ‘happy ending’ by which the FSFI ‘merged gladly’ with the men’s organization,\(^ {116}\) the historical account developed above reveals a much more contested process of assimilation. The FSFI’s successes motivated the IAAF to take strategic action to maintain and expand its international authority, leading to a long, and still ongoing, struggle for women’s equal participation in athletics, both on and off the field of play.

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1. At various Games from 1900-1924 women competed in archery, diving, fencing, figure skating, golf, swimming, and tennis.
2. Following a Congress decision in June 2019, the IAAF has changed its official name into World Athletics. As this research has been conducted prior to the name change and relies on documents that all refer to the IAAF name rather than World Athletics, we use IAAF as the acronym for the organization.
This narrative appears in both scholarly and popular accounts. For examples of sources that provide this account, see Cecile Houry, ‘American Women and the Modern Summer Olympic Games: A Story of Obstacles and Struggles for Participation and Equality’ (PhD diss., University of Miami, 2008); Mary H. Leigh and Thérèse M. Bonin, ‘The Pioneering Role Of Madame Alice Milliat and the FSFI in Establishing International Track and Field Competition for Women,’ Journal of Sport History 4, no. 1 (1977): 72-83; Bruce Kidd, The Struggle for Canadian Sport (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).


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