

07/03/2007 - Restoring the Balance: from the Side Saddle to the Podium



A 1905 Jumping champion

From the marginal to the side-saddle to the top... There is little doubt that women's place in equestrian sport has been defined and redefined over and over during the past few centuries. And today, it is no longer a question of whether women have a place in equestrian sport, it has become a reality which cannot be denied. Indeed, when tracing the form then till now, as the photos show, one is faced with a fascinating demonstration of both cultural and social evolution, and thus a fitting tribute to the International Women's Day, 8th March.

Indeed, equestrian sport today is one of the very few sports where men and women compete on equal terms and this all the way up to Olympic level. This level playing field for women and men has certainly proved to be beneficial as we now see women at the top of the list in many of the equestrian disciplines. Notably, Meredith Michaels Beerbaum, currently ranked number one in the FEI World Jumping Riders Rankings, Anky van Grunsven World Dressage Champion or even Zara Philipps, Eventing World Champion who was also elected 2006 BBC Sports Personality of the year.

Lest we forget that women and riding, and sport in general for that matter, have emerged from a rather tumultuous past. The Olympic Games were not originally intended for female participation, and if any presence were permitted, it was in select sports as most involvement of women in high level competition was deemed both detrimental for their health and appearance, that is, not particularly lady-like.

The success currently encountered by women in equestrian sport is really quite remarkable, particularly when we look back to the very fascinating side-saddle era, which by many accounts probably started in the 16th century and went on to see women competing from around 1870 up until World War I. Subsequently, side-saddle competitions were held here and there up until the 1960s, but these were more nostalgic in nature.

In the 1920s/30s, there were events for women such as the Nations Cup, but these were generally for the wives or sisters of famous riders or organisers, and it was not until the 1950s that the real emancipation for women in equestrian sport began. This was partly due to the fact that up until then, equestrian sports had mostly been run by the military, but as the military cavalries were slowly abolished, civil organisations began to take over, and this then had the positive effect of including women.

The trend was set in motion and as women began to be included in competitions and notably the Olympic Games, so did the recognition. Indeed, for the first time in Olympic equestrian history, in 1952 in Helsinki, four women were allowed to compete against men in the Dressage discipline. One of those women was Lis Hartel of Denmark, who eight years before had contracted polio and had only partly regained the use of her limbs, however remained paralyzed below the knees. In what can only be described as a magical sporting moment, she went on to win silver whilst providing posterity with one of the most emotional moments in Olympic history.

This led to the inclusion of women in the Jumping discipline at the Olympic Games of 1956 in Stockholm, which, to the surprise of many, saw Patricia Smythe from Great Britain walk away with a bronze team medal. Eventing came next, in 1964 in Tokyo, where American rider Lana du Pont became the first woman to compete in the Olympic three-day-event, also as a member of the silver medal team.

This prominence of women on the field is also reflected in the administration of the sport, as the FEI is one of only two Summer Olympic International Federations to be presided by a woman, and this for over 20 years. Beginning with HRH The Princess Royal from 1986-1994, followed by HRH The Infanta Doña Pilar de Borbón (ESP) 1994 – 2006 and currently presided by HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein (JOR). It is also interesting to note that both The Princess Royal and the current FEI President are Olympic athletes. Furthermore, the FEI headquarters is also representative of women's active involvement in the sport, with women present at all levels of the organisation.

Women hold up half the sky, they say. At least...