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ORIGINAL

WOMEN OLYMPIANS IN THE INTERNATIONAL DESCENT OF THE RIVER SELLA: CHANGES IN PARTICIPATION

MUJERES OLIMPICAS EN EL DESCENSO INTERNACIONAL DEL SELLA: EVOLUCIÓN DE SU PARTICIPACIÓN

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ABSTRACT

This work aims to analyze the role of women in the International Descent of Sella, relating it to women's participation in the Olympic games. Next, we have focused on the Spanish female paddlers, and their participation in the sports event that enable the Spanish Canoeing Federation to be founded, the International Descent of the Sella, thanks to its creator, Dionisio de la Huerta.

Using a qualitative multidisciplinary descriptive methodology, we have taken into account economic, social, cultural and recreational aspects by conducting a study of Olympic paddlers, their track record, as well as their participation in the International Sella Descent. The results show a late incorporation of women into

the competitive sports field, linked to gender stereotypes, as well as inequalities in participation conditions.

KEYWORDS: Descent of the River Sella, canoeing, Spain, Olympic sportswomen.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar el papel de la mujer en el Descenso Internacional del Sella, relacionándolo con la participación femenina en los juegos olímpicos. A continuación, nos hemos centrado en las palistas femeninas españolas, y su participación en la prueba deportiva que consiguió que se fundara la Federación Española de Piragüismo, el Descenso Internacional del Sella, gracias a su creador, Dionisio de la Huerta.

Utilizando una metodología cualitativa descriptiva multidisciplinar, hemos tenido en cuenta aspectos económicos, sociales, culturales y recreativos realizando un estudio de las palistas olímpicas, su palmarés, así como su participación en el Descenso Internacional del Sella. Los resultados muestran una incorporación tardía de la mujer al ámbito deportivo competitivo, ligado a estereotipos de género, así como desigualdades en las condiciones de participación.

PALABRAS CLAVE Descenso del Sella, piragüismo, España, mujeres olímpicas mujer deporte.

1. INTRODUCTION

The International Descent of the River Sella was originated by Dionisio in the heart of rural Asturias in the first half of the twentieth century, where male and female stereotypes were poles apart. Sport was a social activity restricted to the male sex. Any women participating in it had to face the prejudices of society that were also present in the media. The event, which reached international status after being held only fifteen times, has similarities to the world's top sports festival: the Olympic Games. In this international competition women have also had to struggle to make a niche for themselves (International Olympic Committee, 2018).

A review of the bibliography shows how participation by women in the Olympic Games has gradually grown in each successive celebration. In the case of the Spanish team, female results outdid male in the last couple of competitions, London 2012 and Rio de Janeiro 2016 (Olivera Betrán, 2012). At a later point this paper will concentrate on canoeing and kayaking, in which female Olympians have been few in number but have achieved an enviable record. The International Descent of the River Sella has often been among the first events in which these sportswomen have competed internationally.

2. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE OLYMPIC GAMES OVER TIME

Women have always been relegated to a background place in the world of sports. As far back as the Olympic Games of Ancient Greece, beginning in 776 B.C., female participation was totally prohibited, not only as contestants in the sports competitions, but even as spectators. This state of affairs was not confined to the Olympic Games, but also applied to other sporting competitions such as the Pythian, Nemean or Isthmian Games. Women had only limited sporting competitions open to them, principally the footraces in honour of the Goddess Hera, known as the Heraean Games.

In 1896 Baron Pierre de Coubertin set up what are termed the modern Olympic Games. The role of women in these early stages of the re-instatement of the Olympic festival was practically non-existent. There were more or less well-known declarations by the Baron and his assistants which attempted to give women a very subsidiary place, merely helping to hand over prizes. Despite this inauspicious beginning, through much effort and especially in minority sports, women did start taking part in Olympic competitions little by little, although not in all the competitions in a given sport. For example, the 1900 Paris Games saw the first female participants, even though of the 997 athletes competing just 22 were women. In that year the Englishwoman Charlotte Cooper became the female Olympic tennis champion. In 1904 in Saint Louis there were women participants in archery, while in Stockholm in 1912 women took part in swimming events, although restricted just to the hundred metres and the four by one hundred metres relay.

It was from the 1928 Amsterdam Games onward that female participation began to be somewhat more significant. Of the 2,606 participants, 277 were women. In spite of this, their access to competing in certain sports was a long and complex matter. For instance, basketball was an exhibition sport in Saint Louis in 1904 and an Olympic sport in Berlin in 1936. However, women's basketball did not appear until Montreal in 1976, that is, forty years later. However, for some sports the wait was even longer. To be precise, the delay was one hundred and eight years before women's boxing was included. This sport had been an Olympic event since 1904, but its female version did not reach this status until London in 2012 (International Olympic Committee, 2018). Women's participation in the Olympic programme thus grew slowly. A Spanish presence in the Olympic Games began with the eight male athletes who were at the 1900 Paris Games. The first Spanish women Olympians were not seen until twenty-four years later in the same locality, as two female tennis players took part in the 1924 Paris Games. As for canoeing, this became an Olympic sport in Berlin in 1936, although it had already been an exhibition sport in Paris in 1924. Despite this, female canoeing did not emerge until the 1948 London Olympic Games (Spanish Olympic Committee, 2018).

Spanish participation in the Olympics sixty-four years later at the 2012 London Games has been termed the "women's Olympiad", since it saw the largest number of female athletes taking part in Olympic events (Olivera Betrán, 2012). One hundred and sixty men and one hundred and twelve women made up the Spanish contingent, and for the first time in history the women won more medals. Out of the sixteen awarded to Spain, eleven were won by women and

only six by men. This trend continued in the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics, where seventeen medals were awarded to the Spanish contingent. However, in this case things were much more equal, as nine went to women and eight to male athletes. The results of the Spanish female participants are more significant yet, if the percentage of women enrolled in sports federations relative to men is kept in mind. In 2017 only 21.5% of sports people in such associations were women (Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2018).

Whilst female participation has grown significantly since the beginning of the modern Olympic Games, women's participation in the most recent event having been around 38% of all competitors, conditions are not the same for female athletes as for their male counterparts (*Juegos Olímpicos y género*, 2018). There are noteworthy differences in the treatment given to men and to women in the media. Men's successes are accorded more praise and there are also significant differences when spectators wish to see sporting events. If they watch television, men's events are scheduled for prime time, whilst women's competitions are relegated to off-peak viewing. If they want to see an event live, they will find that tickets for men's competitions have much higher prices. It is true, though, that the amounts paid per medal won are nowadays the same for female as for male athletes.

3. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE INTERNATIONAL DESCENT OF THE RIVER SELLA

The Descent of the Sella was the first canoeing competition to occur on a river in Spain. In 1929, its creator, Dionisio de la Huerta, arrived in Asturias from Barcelona for his holidays, as he had been doing for a number of summers. However, on this occasion he brought with him a great novelty, a folding canoe. With it he ventured out on the waters of the River Piloña (a tributary of the Sella), in the company of two friends, one of them in a craft of his own making, built with tin cans, nails and a float. Enthused by this experience, he turned it into an activity he carried out each year, changing the route he took. Until he brought together in 1932 at Arriondas several friends from various sports clubs in Asturias, Dionisio's intention had remained the same, to enjoy the day, nature and the company of his friends as he went from Arriondas to Ribadesella. This time, though, his plan was foiled because a good few of those invited saw it as a challenge to reach the bridge at Ribadesella ahead of the others. Thus, despite the founder's opposition, it turned into the first competitive descent of a river in Spain (Cuesta, 1994). Dionisio de la Huerta is shown in Figure 1 holding one of the trophies for the event.



Figure 1. Dionisio de la Huerta in the Twenty-Fifth International Descent of the River Sella. (*La Región* newspaper 6 August 1961).

The meeting gradually grew, attracting a greater number of participants each year, but also more and more spectators, as Dionisio always defended the idea that the Descent of the Sella was supposed to be more of a party than a competition. At the same time, thanks to his travels with the Spanish Tennis Federation, he promoted the Descent of the Sella in various countries, thus succeeding in making the event international after it had been held only fifteen times. The first participation by other nations, France, Italy and Portugal occurred in 1951 (Blanco Casasola, 1986).

Dionisio took his inspiration from the Ancient Greek Olympics to create what for many years was the most important sporting event in Spain. The Descent became an obsession with him, to such a degree that the day after it ended he would already be thinking up fresh features so that the next version would be even more spectacular. Some of the most striking aspects hark back to the Olympic Games of Ancient Greece (Martínez, 2012).

The parade of competitors was one of these features. All the canoeists and kayakers went in procession through the streets of Arriondas before the event started. This tradition has not lasted down to the present day, because when the number of participants began to be more than a thousand, it was unviable for them all to reach the river bank in time for the start. Nowadays there is a parade in the afternoon of the day before the Descent, with a ceremony in which the flags of each of the countries represented are raised and their national anthems are played. After this, a piece of poetry is recited. Dionisio de la Huerta used to intone these pieces like a drama, after which a cannon was fired to signal the start for the numerous competitors present. In these verses clear references to the ancient Olympic Games are to be found. The acts of this Olympiad are said to be called by a king, who could only be the Asturian King Pelagius of olden days, since the setting is Asturias, besides being presided over by a God, Neptune, who also appears on the certificates given to the champions of the Sella meet. There are hence obvious pointers to Greek mythology (Collado Martínez, Robles Tascón, García Morilla and Álvarez del Palacio, 2017).

After covering the nearly twenty kilometres lying between the bridges at Arriondas and Ribadesella, the winners were crowned with laurel wreaths, the laurel being a characteristic tree in Asturias, rather than the olive wreaths

traditional to the Greeks. Nowadays, instead of laurel wreaths they are crowned with the pointed caps that are a part of traditional men's dress in the area. Having put in such an effort, the canoeists and kayakers recoup their strength in a big meal served in the fields at Oba, emulating the banquets enjoyed by Olympic athletes in ancient times. The place for this convivial meeting was chosen by Dionisio for the first competitive Descent in 1932, and the tradition has been kept up to this day. The event's principles are reflected in the Olympic values: *excellence*, always striving for victory and giving of one's best, *friendship*, as it is not only the competitive aspect that is stressed, but rather everything that will ensure enjoyment on the part of athletes and spectators alike, and finally, *respect*.

It may be asked what part women have played in this remarkable event. As noted above, there are various elements that make the International Descent of the River Sella something more than a simple sporting competition.

There have been women in the Descent ever since the first competitive version took place in 1932. As Dionisio always had an inclusive view of sport, he went down the Sella on that original occasion in the company of Marta Junquera. It should be stressed once more that Dionisio's intention was not to organize a competition. Perhaps for that reason, a woman took part in this first competitive descent of a river in Spain in 1932, in the eastern part of Asturias, the heart of Spanish rustic society. The following year another woman once again went down the river with Dionisio, this time Chona Duran (Prado González, 2006). During these early events yet another woman descended the River Sella, Teresa Cerra from Gijón.

Nevertheless, female participation did not recur until nearly twenty years afterwards, in the 1950s. In that decade, women could take part only in the mixed category, in which men and women went down the river together as a recreational activity. The competitive mixed category appeared somewhat later, with participation by mixed couples from outside Spain being prominent. Elsewhere in Europe, women were beginning to be seen regularly taking part in sports, something which did not happen in the eastern corner of Asturias where the event took place. The Spanish social context led to this situation, as the political regime in power restricted women's activities to the domestic environment, the home and the family, whilst men's role was to be involved in public life outside the home (Manrique Arribas, 2018). Any mixed pairs taking part were normally married couples or relations. In 1959, an Asturian girl of just fourteen, Liliana Martínez, went down the river with her ten-year-old brother. The newspapers of the day show the criticisms to which she was subjected for such an action, reflecting stereotypes then applying to women. They were expected to demonstrate qualities like rhythm, expressiveness or flexibility and not traits linked to male stereotypes like strength or competitiveness (López-Crespo and Castejón-Oliva, 2017). These latter are present in canoeing, and especially in view of locations where it takes place, since this is a sport with uncertainties arising from the space in which it is practised.

The 1960s can be seen as a decade of contrasts. In 1961 two striking things happened. First, the *ladies* category appeared, so that women could start to

compete. At the very same time, though, the concept of women as trophies was reinforced, as the tradition of the “Sella sweethearts” began, this involving each team of competitors picking the prettiest girls from their home town to add glamour to the parade. Figure 2 is taken from the newspaper *La Voz de Asturias* of 8 August 1965, and provides a clear example of the male-centred views of the media reproducing sex stereotypes. This meant that women athletes had to offset their sporting prowess with supposedly feminine characteristics, such as beauty, in order to gain acceptance (Ramírez, Piedra, Ries, and Rodríguez, 2014).



Figure 2. Winner on the Sella in 1964, Pilar Van Carsten. [The headline reads “The Pretty Winner of 1964”]. (*La Voz de Asturias*, 08/08/1965).

Consideration solely of the sports angle shows that in this first decade in which women could participate competitively, foreign and native contestants shared wins almost equally. It is true that female participation was very sparse. In 1968 just eight women took part in the event (*La Nueva España* newspaper 7 August 1969). In the 1970s six Spanish women were winners on the Sella, as against four of other nationalities. It was in 1978 that there was the first victory for Asturian women, as Margarita Suárez and María del Mar García came first in the K-2 category (*La Voz de Asturias* newspaper, 9 August 1978).

CLASIFICACION DE CADETES Y DAMAS	
1.—García-Rubio, Casino León,	34-55
2.—Méndez-Echevarría, Grolas,	34-59
3.—Sánchez-Rivas, Ensidesa,	35-10
4.—García-López, Fuen es Carr.,	35-15
5.—J. Lozano, Hispánico,	36-58
6.—Tiscar-Pérez, Ensidesa,	37-00
7.—Carrera-Pérez, Los Gorilas,	37-15
8.—Mateos-Gómez, Kayak,	37-40
9.—Movey-Perret, Inglaterra,	37-45
10.—Rodríguez-Alvarez, Ensidesa,	37-52
11.—Valdés-Pérez, Hellos,	37-58
12.—M. Osa-P. Osa, D. Hellos,	38-15
13.—Balbás-Pérez, Remo Sant.,	38-38
14.—Blanco-Martínez, Hispánico,	38-44
15.—Tereñe-Herranz, L. Rápidos,	40-10

Figure 3. Joint Classification for Ladies and Juveniles, 1975. (*La Nueva España* newspaper, 3 August 1975).

In the 1980s a new trend emerged in female participation. In 1982 there was a significant increase in the number of women taking part, since one hundred and twenty-one crossed the starting line (*La Voz de Avilés* newspaper 7 August 1982). Investigations in the files of the Organizing Committee for the Descent

of the Sella reveal that the majority were Spanish. Nevertheless, among the winners there were similar numbers of Spaniards and women of other nationalities, since twelve Spanish women and eight foreigners won prizes in the K-2 category. In 1980 the winners were Americans, in 1981 they were British, and a year later, in 1982, the first women past the Ribadesella bridge were Australians, while in 1984 another two British contestants came first. As the decade changed, wins by competitors from outside Spain were fewer, just three overall. In 1990 it was a Polish team that won, in 1991 it was the British, and in 1992 it was Austrians. It is noteworthy that this decade saw the first win by the Asturian Almudena Ávila, teamed with Mariam Viña in 1995, and followed by three consecutive victories in 1997, 1998 and 1999 with Victoria Morazaba.

The arrival of the twenty-first century saw Spaniards achieving dominance in the K-2 category. There have been just three wins by other nationalities from 2000 down to the present day. There was a Hungarian victory, followed by a South African success in 2004, and the South Africans won again ten years later in 2014. In the K-2 category in this period the team of Naiara Gómez and María Pérez achieved three consecutive victories in 2006, 2007 and 2008, after which they had a further success in 2011. María Pérez was also a winner teamed with the legend of the Sella, Mara Santos, in 2009.

In the K-1 category the undoubted champion is Mara Santos. This women from Palencia holds the record for wins in the event, with twenty-two victories, twenty in K-1 and two in K-2, the first in 2009 teamed with María Pérez as noted above, and then in 2012 with María Isabel García, the woman Olympian who has participated most often in this Asturian meeting, as will be seen below. Mara's legend has its roots in the 1980s, when she won in the lower categories, children and juniors, after which she triumphed in the adult class. In 2016 she received the *Valores del Sella* prize awarded by the Organizing Committee for the International Descent of the River Sella. This memorable moment is shown in Figure 4. In 2018 she was chosen to recite the poem at the beginning of the event. This is what Dionisio de la Huerta had done to stir the thousands of people present in Arriondas on the first Saturday in August after the second of the month as a prelude to the spectacular start.



Figure 4. Mara Santos Receiving the *Valores del Sella* Prize in 2016. (Photograph from the collection of María Collado).

To end this section, it must be stressed that Dionisio was an authentic visionary. As has been seen, he promoted active tourism half a century before it became fashionable, making it a driving force for the economy of the eastern part of

Asturias at the present day. He made sport his way of life and this has inspired thousands of people year after year to visit the East of Asturias and partake of the star active tourism activity of the region, descending the Sella, just as the professionals do in the competition. However, their aim is to enjoy a day in natural surroundings in the company of family and friends, exactly as Dionisio did with his folding canoe and two friends around sixty years ago (Collado Martínez, 2018).

4. WOMEN OLYMPIANS IN THE INTERNATIONAL DESCENT OF THE SELLA

The Descent was clearly the driving force for canoeing in Spain, since it was largely thanks to it that the Spanish Canoeing Federation [*Federación Española de Piragüismo*] was founded and the practising of this activity was encouraged, leading to a large number of Olympic participants (Antuña Suarez, 2015). It is possible that without it there would be no Spanish women Olympians in this sport, since the event stimulated canoeing and kayaking in Spain. When it had already reached an international status, there was still no specific federation in Spain, so that the Descent of the Sella depended on the Rowing Federation, which often put obstacles in the path of developing the event. Hence, Dionisio de la Huerta never ceased writing letters to the authorities, both sporting and other, to explain how canoeing functioned in other countries. These missives were directed to the Spanish National Sports Office [*Delegación Nacional de Deportes*] and the Director of Sports Federations [*Jefe de Federaciones*]. In 1959 the long-awaited Spanish Canoeing Federation was founded, leading to the promotion of various formats, as well as specialist training for technicians (Cuesta, 1994).

This Federation was founded in 1959. However, canoeing had already been an Olympic sport since the 1936 Berlin Games and had been an exhibition sport in Paris in 1924. This gives an idea of the growth in this sporting activity in other countries. Spanish male kayakers took part in the Olympic Games for the first time in Rome in 1960. A statement made by one of the Spanish athletes stresses the disadvantages under which Spain laboured relative to other countries. Juan Miguel Feliz was one of the Spaniards participating, and had been the winner in the International Descent of the River Sella in 1959 teamed with José Luis Gutiérrez. He described his Olympic experience by saying that everything had been unexpected, as it was the very first time they had participated. Their limited experiences outside Spain had not been brilliant, and they were surprised to reach the semi-finals, to the extent they could not believe their luck. In the final, lacking familiarity with some techniques, they had seen how all the others shot out of the starting position like bullets from a gun and had raced to keep up with them. Whatever moves the others made they had tended to follow suit, right or wrong, which is how things had ended. (*Radio Televisión Española*, 2016).

For its part, Spanish women's canoeing was not present in the Olympic Games until 1992 in Barcelona. Spain participated with a K-4 crewed by Luisa María Álvarez Iglesias, Joaquina Costa Iglesias, Ana María Penas Balchada and

Belén Sánchez Jiménez, and with a K-2 crewed by Joaquina Costa Iglesias and Belén Sánchez Jiménez (Spanish Olympic Committee, 2018). Thus, women appeared thirty-three years after their male counterparts. It is not surprising that Spanish women had to wait more than three decades to be in the Games if it is kept in mind that the Descent of the Sella was a driving force behind Spanish canoeing, and the “ladies” category was not added to the event until 1961. Hence, women had had no part in the competition until that point. There are other features which also put a brake on women’s participation in the Olympic Games, as will be seen below.

4.1 SPANISH WOMEN OLYMPIANS

From the Barcelona Olympics of 1992 to the Rio de Janeiro Games in 2016 just ten women kayakers represented Spain, nine in sprints (flat water) and one in slalom (white water). Their activity was very limited, but their achievements were noteworthy, as these ten competitors between them gathered two Olympic medals and twenty-one of the Olympic diplomas awarded to contestants in the top eight finishers.

An interview given by one of the first four Spanish women contestants to represent her country in the Olympics helps in understanding the reasons for this situation. Luisa María Álvarez Iglesias became the trainer for the male team in 1996. She explained her experiences from the Barcelona Olympics. This Asturian sportswoman stressed that being in the Olympic Games is the goal pursued by every sportsperson, since it cannot be compared with other international events such as the World Canoeing Championships, since these involve only canoeists and kayakers. In the Olympics, all of the stars of international sport are gathered together in a single place, for example the leading lights of the N.B.A., and at the level of organization everything is thoroughly set up, with great efforts made for the whole event to go smoothly. Another point she mentioned was the ambiance in the Olympic village where all the athletes live side by side (Álvarez Iglesias, 2018).

When she was asked if there was any form of discrimination, her answer was that there is. One of the main differences was that male contestants were brought together as a team at a training camp, whilst the women were not. This changed with the arrival of a new trainer of Hungarian origin, Gyöula Fussesery, who demanded that the female team should also benefit from this arrangement. Through great exertion they managed to qualify for their Olympic dream. The women’s team was expected to put in maximum effort, with members having to win the right to stay on the team in competition after competition, so that if their results were not brilliant, they were not called to take part. When new equipment arrived, it was always destined for the men’s team, the same being the case for any grants. If the subsidies available decreased, any cuts were inflicted on the female team, to the extent that its very existence might be threatened. All of these aspects combined with sexual stereotyping and the view of women’s place led to massive numbers of Spanish female kayakers and canoeists leaving the Federation, in some seasons as many as 40% (Isorna Folgar et al., 2019). The table below lists the ten female Olympians and shows their extraordinary successes:

Table 1. Spanish Female Olympic Kayakers

Name	Games	Event	Classification
Luisa María Álvarez Iglesias	Barcelona 1992	Kayak 500 m K4	Fourth in Semi-final
Joaquina Costa Iglesias	Barcelona 1992	Kayak 500 m K4	Fourth in Semi-final
		Kayak 500 m K2	Ninth in Semi-final
Ana María Penas Balchada	Barcelona 1992	Kayak 500 m K4	Fourth in Semi-final
	Atlanta 1996	Kayak 500 m K4	Sixth: Diploma
	Sydney 2000	Kayak 500 m K4	Eighth: Diploma
Belén Sánchez Jiménez	Barcelona 1992	Kayak 500 m K4	Fourth in Semi-final
		Kayak 500 m K2	Ninth in Semi-final
	Atlanta 1996	Kayak 500 m K4	Sixth: Diploma
		Kayak 500 m K1	Sixth in Semi-final
Sydney 2000	Kayak 500 m K2 Kayak 500 m K4	Seventh: Diploma Eighth: Diploma	
María Isabel García Suárez	Sydney 2000	Kayak 500 m K2	Seventh: Diploma
	Athens 2004	Kayak 500 m K4	Fifth: Diploma
Beatriz Manchón Portillo	Atlanta 1996	Kayak 500 m K2	Sixth: Diploma
		Kayak 500 m K4	Sixth: Diploma
	Sydney 2000	Kayak 500 m K4	Eighth: Diploma
	Athens 2004	Kayak 500 m K2	Fifth: Diploma
Kayak 500 m K4		Fifth: Diploma	
Beijing 2008	Kayak 500 m K2	Fourth in Semi-final	
	Kayak 500 m K4	Fifth: Diploma	
Sonia Molanes Costa	Beijing 2008	Kayak 500 m K2	Fourth in Semi-final
		Kayak 500 m K4	Fifth: Diploma
Teresa Portela Rivas	Sydney 2000	Kayak 500 m K1	Tenth in Semi-final
	Athens 2004	Kayak 500 m K2	Fifth: Diploma
		Kayak 500 m K4	Fifth: Diploma
	Beijing 2008	Kayak 500 m K1	Sixth in Semi-final
		Kayak 500 m K4	Fifth: Diploma
London 2012	Kayak 200 m K1	Fourth: Diploma	
Río 2016	Kayak 200 m K1	Sixth: Diploma	
Jana Smidakova Krompolcova	Athens 2004	Kayak 500 m K4	Fifth: Diploma
	Beijing 2008	Kayak 500 m K4	Fifth: Diploma
Maialen Chourraut Yurramendi	Beijing 2008	Kayak K1	Sixteenth in Elimination Round
	London 2012	Kayak K1	Third: Bronze Medal
	Río 2016	Kayak K1	First: Gold Medal

4.2 WOMEN OLYMPIANS IN THE INTERNATIONAL DESCENT OF THE SELLA

Participation by women Olympians in the International Descent of the River Sella is sparse. It has mostly been restricted to the lower categories, as will be noted below.

- **Luisa María Álvarez Iglesias** participated in the Descent in the early 1980s, but then moved to competing in international championships. There are several

reasons for this. The chief cause is that world championships tend to be held in August and thus overlap with the date for the Asturian event, which takes place on the first Saturday in August after the second of the month. Another motive was the frequent unwillingness on the part of her trainers to let her take part in the event because of the starting position assigned to women on the Sella. As they have to struggle at the off among a thousand other vessels, damage to craft is commonplace. Hence, if they did go down the Sella, they had to do so with lower quality boats. Of course, they had no hope of being outright winners when setting off from a position so far to the rear, simply hoping to show their face, as it were. Luisa went down the river on more than one occasion thanks to Emilio Llamedo, Chairman of the Organizing Committee for the International Descent of the River Sella and President of the Asturian Canoeing Federation in the 1980s, who managed to get her suitable boats.

- **María Isabel García Suárez:** This Asturian is the woman Olympian who has participated most often in the Descent. She started taking part in the juvenile category in 1993 and 1994, making her debut in 1993 with a win. Thereafter she competed as a junior in 1995 and 1996, winning for a second time in 1996. In 1997 she made her first appearance in the senior category, in which over the years she has competed in both K-1 and K-2, achieving victories in both formats. Her first win as a senior came in 1999 in the K-1 category and her last in 2012 when she teamed up with the lady known as the Queen of the Sella, Mara Santos, with their K-2 crossing the finishing line ahead of all rivals.

- **Jana Smidakova Krompolcova:** Asturian by adoption, she is of Czech origin and arrived in Asturias at the age of seven. She participated for the first time in the Descent of the Sella in 1998 in the juvenile category, coming third. In the following year, 1999, she came first in the same class. Her last participation was in 2000, this time in the junior category, which she won.

As may be seen, participation by women kayakers and canoeists of the highest levels in the Sella Descent is limited. Several causes may be cited as a possible key to this situation:

The first is that the Descent of the Sella is a long-distance event, but the canoe marathon is not one of the disciplines found on the programme at the Olympics. Doubtless Mara Santos, world canoe marathon champion in 2000, twice runner-up, in 2002 and 2003, and twice in third place, in 2001 and 2007, would have been a great candidate for swelling the Spanish bag of Olympic medals.

The second is the starting position. The positioning used for the Sella does not offer equal opportunities for all participants. The starting order is by categories, as follows: K-2 Senior Men, K-1 Senior Men, K-2 Junior Men, and K-1 Junior Men. Only after this can women start: K-2 Senior Women, K-1 Senior Women, K-2 Junior Women, and K-1 Junior Women. Thereafter all remaining categories follow: canoes, juveniles, veterans and mixed crews. The implications of this are clear if the starting position for María Isabel García Suarez in 1999 is considered. She came first in her K1-DS class, but her starting position was 566, implying more than 200 metres after the first vessel at the off. Figure 5 shows the arrangement of craft at the starting point next to the Arriondas bridge. To the left are the male K-2 Senior participants, after whom come all the other categories in accordance with the order described above.

As Mara Santos explained (Mara Santos, 2018), starting as far back as position



Figure 5. Positioning of Craft for the Start in Arriondas. (Photograph from the Collection of María Collado).

566 means that the race has to be envisaged differently. First of all, it is necessary to define a *plan or strategy to be adopted*, even though the key aspect is the *ability and capacity to respond to any unforeseen circumstance*. Mara also had the experience of taking part in the Descent in the mixed class with her brother. This category begins even later, and it is striking how her brother reacted after the start by saying it was a whole new world, since he had always been in the group leaving first.

Luisa Álvarez also recounted her experience of starts, as noted above. She explained that on the Sella women had no expectations of being overall winners, but rather went there to show their faces. Mara stated that luck is also a crucial factor. This may be what was lacking for Luisa when she took part in the event. On one occasion she came in third, but the other two times she suffered damage to her boat and paddle, once because a male-crewed K-2 went right over her craft.

The third cause was discrimination in the award of prizes. Until two decades ago, there were no cash prizes for women, nor did they ascend the Sella podium that stands next to the finishing line at the Ribadesella bridge. It is true that this has not been the case in more recent meets. As in other international competitions included in the *Competitions in the World Series* (International Canoe Federation, 2018), winners receive money prizes. A minimum amount is set for these prizes, but each competition is free to distribute it over the various categories as desired (Rodríguez Costales, 2018). In the case of the Sella event, women have also been receiving cash prizes since the 1990s, and with the arrival of the twenty-first century the amounts paid are now the same for both male and female competitors. In addition, women are now crowned with pointed caps in the same way as men and get to ascend the podium next to the bridge in Ribadesella.



Figure 6. Winners of the Eightieth Sella Event on the Podium Next to the Ribadesella Bridge Wearing Asturian Pointed Caps (*El Fielato* newspaper, 7 August 2017).

All these changes have made it possible for trends to be reversed. In recent years there has been more participation by female kayakers who represent Spain internationally, as will be seen below.

4.3 WOMEN FROM THE SPANISH NATIONAL TEAM IN THE INTERNATIONAL DESCENT OF THE RIVER SELLA

Over the last decade there has been greater participation by women kayakers in the International Descent of the River Sella who hope to take part in the Olympic Games, contestants belonging to the national team. A detailed analysis of the files of the Organizing Committee for the International Descent of the River Sella shows that some of the most prominent participations are those listed below.

- **Eva Barrios:** She took part in 2008 in the K-1 senior category, coming third. In 2016, once again in the K-1 category, she just missed being on the podium, coming fourth. The next year, 2017, she came second, teamed with Aurora Figueras, and in the latest Descent she achieved first place in this same K-2 category with Amaia Osaba as her partner.

- **Patricia Coco Rohde:** Her first participation in the Sella Descent was in the juvenile K-2 class, partnering Virginia Sánchez in 2006, and coming eighth. In 2008, she took part in the mixed junior category teamed with Germán Sierra and came seventh. The year 2009 saw her win the K-1 junior category. The following year, 2010, she moved up to the senior class and came second after

Mara Santos. In 2012, she crossed the finishing line in eighth place. Her last participation in the event was in 2017, when she came third in the K-2 category teamed with Cristina Franco.

- **Isabel María Contreras Rodríguez:** In 2016 she took part in the K-2 class partnering Sara Ouzande, but they were unable to finish the race. As noted above, being one of the best kayakers is not directly related to winning on the Sella, and does not even guarantee reaching the finishing line.

- **María Corbera Muñoz:** She participated in 2011 in the mixed class and came in fourth.

- **Tania Fernández García:** She took part in 2017 achieving first place in the K-1 category. In 2018 she came second in the K-2 class, partnering Tania Elizabeth Álvarez.

- **Natalia García Naveiro:** She competed as a junior in 2012, teamed with Tania Álvarez, and reached the finish in fourth place.

- **Alicia Heredia Ávila:** She was a contestant in 2012, partnering Raquel Bota, and they managed a seventh place.

- **María Begoña Lazcano Guimerans:** She came second in the mixed class in 2016, teamed with Ian Carballo.

- **Barbara Pardo Mas:** She began competing in the Sella Descent in the juvenile category, and was juvenile champion in the two consecutive years 2014 and 2015. Later, in 2016, she was winner in the junior K-2 class, partnering Nora Rey.

- **Sara Ouzande Iturralde:** As already noted, she participated in 2016 teamed with Isabel María Contreras. She had previously taken part in the mixed class in 2012 partnered by Pablo Claro.

- **Ainara Portela:** She is another kayaker who started her descents of the Sella in the juvenile category in 2005 and coming first. This was all the more remarkable in that she had left the starting line in Arriondas in position number 1082. The next year she competed again as a juvenile, and was champion for a second time in that class. She later participated in the K-1 senior category in 2015, and reached Ribadesella in seventh place in that class.

5. CONCLUSION

From ancient times down to the mid twentieth century, sport was considered men's business. This was linked to sex stereotypes, as men were expected to be courageous, agile, vigorous, whilst the stereotypical woman was related to beauty, grace and elegance. These sexual stereotypes led women's incorporation into the world of sport to come late in time. In the Classical period, the Greek Olympic Games did not permit participation by women, who

had a few competitions exclusively for them. Even when the Games were revived in the twentieth century, women could still not practise competitive sports on a level footing with male categories.

The International Descent of the River Sella is the competition which made possible the creation of the Spanish Canoeing Federation. This event emerged in the 1930s, but the “ladies” category did not appear until 1961. Up to then, any female participation had been purely recreational, as they always took part only in the mixed class partnering a family member or their husband. The first female kayakers to descend the Sella had to face the prejudices of traditional society, which did not consider such an activity appropriate for women.

Although there are still aspects in it that might be improved, the International Descent of the River Sella has gradually adapted itself to the new age of Spanish women’s sport. The event, as has been seen, attracts considerable female participation in the lower categories, which allows women kayakers to gain experience of international competitive contests. Doubtless, the International Descent of the River Sella, with all its peculiarities and the aspects surrounding the sports meeting itself is more than just a question of win or lose. Despite all the difficulties noted, year after year female contestants return to the waters of the River Sella.

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