

FIRST AMONG EQUALS

(COURTESY OF RIVER & ROWING MUSEUM,
HENLEY-ON-THAMES)

This spring, the Women's Boat Race will run on the same day, over the same course as the men's race for the first time in the event's 186-year history. To celebrate, Caroline Roberts charts the amazing progress made by pioneering sportswomen over the last century

This April, crews of strapping rowers will power their way up the Thames, battling the Tideway currents and driving themselves to near collapse in pursuit of victory in the Boat Race. Since its inception in 1829, the annual contest between the universities of Oxford and Cambridge has become a national institution. But this year there is an important difference – some of those rowers will be women.

For the first time ever, a Women's Boat Race will be run on the same day and over the same course as the men's.

It's been a long wait. For years, many in the rowing community believed that women were more suited to rowing gently down the stream dressed in neat pinafores. In the early 1960s the Captain of Selwyn College, Cambridge wrote: "I personally do not approve of women rowing at all. It is a ghastly sight, an anatomical impossibility and physiologically dangerous." Just try telling that to the likes of Katherine Grainger and the other female athletes who bagged rowing gold medals at London 2012.

Despite the prevailing attitudes, there has been a women's version of the Boat Race in one form or another since 1927. Since the late 1970s, it has been run the week before the men's race over a shorter and less challenging stretch of water at Henley-on-Thames. Giving it equal billing with the men's race is a significant step forward.

It's just the latest example of the progress women have made in many sports over the last century. That progress has often been kickstarted by a few pioneering women who were determined to play the men at their own game.

One of those women was Madge Syers. Madge was born in 1881, one of the 15 children of a London builder. She enjoyed



WE'RE MAKING PROGRESS...

- Since the introduction of women's boxing in 2012, when GB's Nicola Adams won the inaugural gold medal, there are no longer any male-only sports in the Olympics.

- Scottish-born Susie Wolff, 32, a development driver for the Williams F1 team, took part in practice sessions at the British and German Grands Prix weekends last year.

- In 2007, Wimbledon finally came into line with other Grand Slam tennis tournaments by awarding equal prize money to male and female players.

... BUT THERE'S STILL A WAY TO GO

- According to research by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF), only 0.4 per cent of commercial investment in sport goes to women's sport, and it accounts for only 7 per cent of sports coverage in the media.

- Rachel Yankey, the Arsenal and England footballer has scored 19 goals for her country – as many as David Beckham – but the chances are you've never heard of her. And Fifa President, Sepp Blatter's suggestion for how to get more people interested in women's football? Tighter shorts!

- The BBC received hundreds of complaints when commentator John Inverdale said that 2013 Wimbledon champion Marion Bartoli was "never going to be a looker" like Maria Sharapova, so she had to "be scrappy and fight."



many sports, but her real passion was ice skating. At the time, women were allowed to take part in pairs skating competitions with a male partner, but there were no women's individual events. The sport's governing body had decreed that ladies were unsuited to the leaps and spins that characterised the 'international style' of skating that had become popular around the turn of the century.

But Madge spotted a loophole. The authorities were so convinced that no woman would even think about attempting these feats that they had never officially set down a male-only rule, so she was able to enter the 1902 men's world championship. Amazingly, she managed to avoid becoming entangled in her regulation ankle-length skirt and executed those leaps and spins with an athleticism and precision that earned her the silver medal. The Swiss male champion was reportedly so bowled

over that he presented her with his gold medal too.

The international governing body, however, was less impressed and responded by banning women from all international style competitions. But because this wasn't implemented straight away, Madge was able to beat the men in the 1903 and 1904 British championships and continued to campaign for a women's world championship. She finally got her wish in 1906, when she became the first winner of the title. She then went on to win a gold medal when the Olympics came to London in 1908 – the first time figure skating had been included in the programme.

Sadly, Madge never saw the huge progress made in women's skating over the following decades. She died in 1917 at the age of only 35. But she is remembered in the skating world as paving the way for the stars of the future.

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For many years, the marathon was another event considered unsuitable for women, despite plenty of evidence to the contrary. It was a British runner, Violet Piercy, who was the first woman to be officially recognised as completing the distance when she clocked a time of 3:40:22 in a race from Windsor to London in 1926.

But four decades after Violet's triumph, women were still banned from major marathons, including the Olympics and the world-famous annual marathon in Boston, Massachusetts. When local woman Roberta Gibb tried to enter in 1966, she received a letter from the organisers stating that women were not physiologically capable of running the distance. It made her even more determined to prove them wrong.

Disguised in a hooded sweatshirt, she hid in bushes near the start and joined in the field as it passed. To



Women and sport: it's been a long century of progress

(COURTESY OF RIVER & ROWING MUSEUM, HENLEY-ON-THAMES)



Women's rowing in the 1920s called for proper footwear, stylish berets and some rather jaunty accessories

her delight, the camaraderie among the runners proved stronger than the gender difference, and the pack closed around her to protect her from interfering officialdom. The crowds cheered as she passed and the press were soon following her progress.

She crossed the line in a time of 3:21, ahead of two-thirds of the field. The next day newspaper headlines celebrated her success although, of course, they made much of the fact that she was a 'blonde gal' and a recent bride. The run heralded a new era for women's running and the Boston Marathon was officially opened to female competitors in 1972, although it took until 1984 for the women's marathon to become an Olympic event.

Fast forward to the new millennium and on April 13, 2003, the media was closely following the progress of another woman runner. It was the London Marathon and British athlete, Paula Radcliffe, was running at what commentators were calling a 'suicidal' pace. Many were confidently predicting that she would burn out by the 20 mile mark. To their amazement, she kept going and put in a final sprint over the last mile to finish in 2:15:25, setting a new women's world record, which smashed her previous record by almost two minutes. At the time of writing, that record still stands and is just 12 minutes slower than the current men's record.

So is it possible that women will eventually close the gender gap and compete alongside men at the top levels of sport? In most disciplines, the answer is probably no, says Rob Cramb, a teaching fellow in exercise physiology at the University of Durham. "Radcliffe is a phenomenal athlete, but men have bigger hearts and lungs so can take in more oxygen and convert that to energy better than women. A world class male will always beat a world class female." The same is true of sports requiring strength and power, due to men's greater muscle mass, he adds.

However, says Cramb, "There's no reason why women can't compete on an equal footing in sports where fine motor skills are the most important factor – something like Formula One where it's an advantage to be smaller and lighter. You get women fighter pilots so why not women racing drivers?"

In fact, women have taken part in motorsport throughout its history – the first known ladies' motorised tricycle race took place in 1897. Rally driving also has a long history of female participation. One of the most prominent women drivers in the '50s and '60s was Britain's Anne Hall, who took part in many international, long distance races, winning a number of women's trophies and finishing third overall in the East African Safari Rally of 1961. After many years of retirement, she returned to the sport at

the age of 72 to finish well up the field in the 1988 Pirelli Classic Marathon, a 2,300-mile traverse of the Alps, driving a 1961 Ford Anglia.

But the only woman ever to win a Formula One race is South African-born Desiré Wilson, who triumphed in a race at Brands Hatch in the 1980 British Aurora F1 Series. Wilson has spoken of the sexism she met with during her career and once reported being run off the track by a male driver, who later said he had done it because women had no place in Formula One. Even today, the higher echelons of the sport remain a largely male preserve and we're yet to see a female version of Lewis Hamilton.

More sponsorship is needed if women are to progress in many sports, says Ruth Holdaway, Chief Executive of the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation. It's often corporate sponsorship that allows large sporting events to take place. These are then covered by the media, generating public interest which in turn leads to more sponsorship. "Research shows that six out of ten sports fans would like to see more live coverage of women's sport so there is clear evidence that the audience is there."

Sponsorship from asset management company, Newton, has been instrumental in bringing the Women's Boat Race to London. "It's an excellent demonstration of how sports, a forward-thinking sponsor and the media can work together," Ruth adds. "The impact of bringing the women's Boat Race in line with the men's can't be overstated. Now, we need to see more sponsors and broadcasters willing to take the initiative when considering women's sport. Raising its profile is important for so many reasons. There's a clear inactivity crisis amongst women and girls in the UK, and the more we see women playing sport, the more we can show that it really is for everybody." ■

The Newton Women's Boat Race will take place on April 11. *Driven by Desire: The Desiré Wilson Story* is available from Veloce Publishing (veloce.co.uk)