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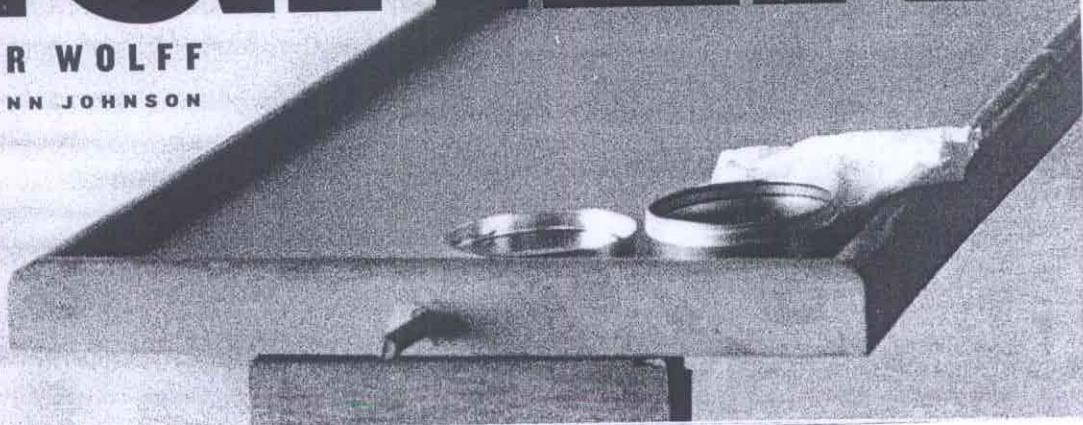
The number of female Olympians is growing—even a pistol-packing Iranian is in Sydney—but for many the Games are unattainable because of oppression, prejudice and disease



Aiming HIGHER

BY ALEXANDER WOLFF
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNN JOHNSON

Solo shot Iran's only female Olympian, Kazemi trains for air pistol shooting in the prescribed clothing for Muslim women.





ON THE 17th day of the Olympics, at the International Shooting Centre, west of Sydney, a woman in a billowy, monochromatic cloak will raise a pistol in her right hand. She will extend that arm perfectly parallel to the ground. Peering out from fabric cowlings her face, she will sight a target 10 meters away, completely still herself and squeeze off a shot.

Manijeh Kazemi, 26, is from the Islamic Republic of Iran, and she is its sole female Olympian. Shooting is one of the few sports that can be performed in *hejab*, the habit that every Iranian woman must wear so she might remain, as an imam has put it, "as a pearl in its shell." But her motionless pose will contrast starkly with what sports have become for women in much of the rest of the world, where unfettered female movement constitutes a social movement in the same larger, transformative sense that the Olympics themselves claim to be.

The presence of this lone Iranian woman signifies an absence, too. At a time when a record two-fifths of Olympic athletes are female, when women are competing in every sport that men do except boxing and

Paddle to the medal? Kayakers, who are now allowed to leave their homes to train, may be Iran's next women Olympians.

wrestling, when IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch declares that "the problem of [women's] participation has been solved," the problem is in fact unsolved. A century after women first competed in the Olympics, a sizable percentage of the 199 nations represented in Sydney will still be without a female athlete. In 1992, 35 of the 173 contingents in Barcelona were entirely male, as were 26 of the 197 in Atlanta four years ago.

About half of those all-male Olympic teams represented Islamic regimes like

throughout the Muslim world, Boulmerka posed the question: Where does the truth in Islam lie? With the Koranic verse that says "Respect women, who have borne you"? Or with fundamentalists like Afghanistan's ruling Taliban, who refuse to permit women to get a job, an education, simple health care, much less game?

To Boulmerka the answer is self-evident. "You cannot wear *hejab* on the track," she has said, "just as you cannot wear shorts in the mosque." To some mullahs in Alge-

Though Samaranch says "the problem of [female] participation has been solved," it is not solved.

Saudi Arabia, where Koranic laws are so strict, stricter even than those in Iran, that women aren't permitted to drive, vote or leave the house without the permission of husbands or fathers. In Algeria, where supporters of a fundamentalist insurgency have machine-gunned to death women who wait unveiled for a bus, Hassiba Boulmerka, the gold medalist in the 1,500 meters at the '92 Games, moves in a cordon of bodyguards and carries a .38. A Saudi sports magazine once published a photograph of Boulmerka—but only after retouching sleeves onto her singlet.

In dedicating her medal to women

ria, who have denounced her "for running with naked legs in front of thousands of men," the answer is just as doctrinaire.

But the worldwide struggle of women athletes extends beyond the Islamic world. Uruguay's 15-member contingent in Sydney will include only three women, in part because machismo permeates South America and society dictates the choices women make. Botswana will send no women, for people in that African nation struggle simply to eat and stay healthy, and in Setswana culture playing sports is mostly a male prerogative. To grow up female in the U.S. and qualify for the Olympics, even





as an also-ran, the odds are daunting. But in much of the rest of the world, those odds are as long as the wind.

ISLAMIC LAW, *shariat*, is "the road to the spring." "The road I walk is narrow," Faezeh Hashemi says. So she keeps to the path, even as modernity beckons from one side and tradition glowers from the other.

Hashemi founded a newspaper for Iranian women, only to watch conservative clerics shut it down. She won a seat in parliament, only to be voted out after one term by restive Tehranis disappointed that she refused to distance herself from her father, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the conservative who was Iran's president from 1989 to '97. She wears blue jeans under her *hejab*, yet when she calls for women's sports on Islamic terms she uses the revolutionary idiom that demonizes the decadent West: "Today's generation must not be kept thirsty to satiate itself from the enemy's spring."

Hashemi is a vice president of Iran's Olympic Committee and founder of the Islamic Countries Women's Games, which began in 1993 and are renewed each quadrennium. Men are permitted to watch the opening ceremonies and such demure events as chess, riding and shooting, all of which can be disputed in *hejab*. For volleyball and basketball, men are banned and *hejab* comes off.

Sports for women stopped completely with the fundamentalist revolution in 1979.

Hashemi, who was born in '63, had been encouraged as a child to practice volleyball, swimming, badminton and table tennis inside her family's compound. "My father's support is one of the main reasons we've been able to do what we've done," she says. "He helped find the money and change attitudes toward sport for women. People see me as a religious girl, so they see that you can be a sportswoman and a religious person."

In the early 1980s, Hashemi began to

lobby for recreational sports in the schools. Then she made the case for competition, arguing that without it, sports lose meaning. It took a decade before officials agreed to send women to the Asian Games. Only in '96 did they send one to the Olympics. During the first Islamic Women's Games, clerics denounced the spectacle of a woman, even one *hejab*-ed to the hilt, bearing a torch through the streets of Tehran; at the second Games, in '97, they raised no such objections. "So it takes time," Hashemi says. "Technically and culturally." In Farsi the term is *kam kam*—bit by bit.

Down and dirty Soccer is Uruguay's national passion, but the sight of women's teams like River Plate is shocking to some men.

Some fundamentalist clerics still believe that a woman who speaks in public contravenes the word of the prophet. But two million Iranian women participate in sports, compared to perhaps 12,000 before the revolution. Demand overwhelms the few facilities from which men are banned so women may swim, work out or play volleyball or basketball, as women most anywhere else in the world can do. Segregated sports have created a cohort of female coaches and administrators, and attracted women from conservative backgrounds who might not otherwise be willing to get in the game. "*Hejab*," they insist, "is the source of our strength."

Change begets more change, *kam kam*. In Chitgar Park on the outskirts of Tehran, a newlywed couple ignores the sign that says WOMEN ARE NOT TO RIDE BICYCLES IN THE PRESENCE OF MEN, so he might teach her the elements of two-wheeling. Hashemi predicts that kayaking will be the next sport to send an Iranian woman to the Olympics, and the national women's flat-water team is billeted at a training camp for four weeks, a period away from home that, only a few years earlier, husbands or fathers would have never permitted. Women are still barred from watching men play soccer, but at a basketball game between the under-23 men's teams of Iran

A Uruguayan track official shouted at Gyurcsek, "You women should vault in the circus!"

and Syria, female spectators cheer from their quarantine in the upper deck.

Yet some believe Hashemi walks her narrow road all too deliberately. One such dissenter can be found on a Friday in Mellat Park in north Tehran. Wearing what is known as "bad *hejab*," Mahin Gorji plays volleyball with male colleagues from the sports newspaper for which she works. She could not have done this before the astonishing election, in 1997, of reformist president Mohammad Khatami. For cavorting with men to whom she isn't related, the police would have reprimanded Gorji. But

the reformists, supported overwhelmingly by the people, and the clerics, whose hidebound views still prevail, are in a standoff. So people test the law, and if there's no backlash they ignore it, like pedestrians at a gridlocked intersection.

Gorji had been a first-division volleyball player, but her female coach, a moonlighting schoolteacher, only knew so much. So Gorji asked a male coach to help her train in private. He said no. She then trained on her own but messed up her knee and had to retire from elite-level sport. Now in her early 30s, she is left to bat around a ball in the park. "In sport you should be able to compare yourself to other countries," says Gorji, "but with this way we have in Iran, we can't. And if we can't train with the men, why can't we at least go to the stadium and watch them play, so we can learn?"

From satellite TV she knows of the World Cup champion U.S. women's soccer team. But does she know of Boulmerka?

20, her imagination kindled to a hybrid of those two disciplines. She watched the men who pole-vaulted, and eventually she began to imitate them. A Uruguayan track official soon rebuked her: "You women should vault in the circus!"

Within months, at the '99 South American championships, that same official was hanging a bronze medal around Gyuresek's

turned 16, all are uncommonly responsible for their own success. If a Uruguayan woman chooses to stand out in sports, she will do so in defiance of the media images that make their way over the Río de la Plata from Buenos Aires, where women compete to see who can land the youngest boyfriend.

Were Uruguay ever to send women to the Olympics in a team sport, that sport

Even if a Botswanan woman dodges AIDS, she'll be expected to look after the sick and orphaned.

neck. Seven weeks ago she cleared the qualifying standard for Sydney, punching her ticket for track and field's big top.

Before Sydney, Uruguay had produced only 16 female Olympians, and the situa-

ought to be soccer. The Río de la Plata is the Euphrates of the South American game, and Uruguay's three million people look back with disbelieving pride at World Cups won in 1930 and '50. Make a gift of a doll to a working-class girl still innocent of society's expectations, and she may rip off the head to kick it around. But soccer is Uruguay's most sacred male preserve. The female version has existed formally only since 1996. While boys begin playing "baby football" from age five, the organized game remains unavailable to girls younger than 14. The president of Montevideo's most famous soccer club, Peñarol, has vowed that so long as he remains in office there will be no Peñarol women's team. "When I tell a man I play soccer, he will clutch at his heart," says a member of one of the few women's teams, River Plate.

So the River Plate women routinely put up with indignities, such as the recent publication in a Uruguayan tabloid of a doctored picture of Brandi Chastain, the American player who doffed her jersey after the U.S. won the 1999 World Cup. The newspaper had added huge, naked breasts, and trumpeted its fakery with the headline WELCOME FUTBOL FEMININO!

In the Muslim world, to please the mulahs, editors retouch more clothing into the frame. In the Latin world, to please the machistas, they add more flesh. To be a sportswoman is to be whipsawed between poles of male prescription.

IF IRANIAN WOMEN must fight to practice competitive sport, and all but the most determined Uruguayan women won't fight, some women simply can't fight. In Botswana, culture hardly lets them. Many



Embracing hope Ngope (with her mother) holds tight to her dreams of competing for Botswana in karate in 2004.

Does she know that Boulmerka won an Olympic gold medal, only to be denounced and threatened for doing so, and that she now packs heat? Mahin Gorji is a sportswriter, but she says, "I did not know of this woman. Thank you for telling me this."

DEBORAH GYURCSEK practiced gymnastics as a little girl. She ran the sprints as a teenager. Then, just before she turned

tion hasn't improved. In 1992 the country sent 23 athletes to the Games, all of them men. In '96, only two women were among the 14 sent. In Uruguay the dictates of Latin culture are discouraging enough to female athletes, and financial support for athletes of both sexes flows fitfully. As a result a woman's qualifying for the Games is left more or less to chance. Swimmer Serrana Fernández and long jumper Mónica Falcioni will also go to Sydney, but each has had to abandon her sport at least once during her career. Like Gyuresek, who had lost both parents to cancer by the time she



No net gain The most popular sport among Botswana girls is netball, which has little chance of becoming an Olympic sport.

Lethakane with mounds of tailings. Though the mines help give Botswana, a country of 1.6 million people, a reasonably healthy economy, half the population lives in poverty, and the percentage of 15-to-49-year-olds infected with HIV is the highest in the world.

Goitsemodimo will soon board a bus for Gaborone, for national team training camp. A few years earlier two supervisors at a similar sports camp took sexual liberties with three young women in their charge. The scandal came to light not because the girls stood up for themselves, but because the boy athletes, believing the girls had been chosen for the camp as indulgences for their supervisors, spoke up out of resentment.

Botswana could send a woman to the Olympics four years hence if Goitsemodimo tips just so. Women could break through, too, if karate finds a place on the Olympic program. So hopes Tebogo Ngope, who lives with her widowed mother behind a security fence in a bungalow in downtown Gaborone. Ngope won a silver medal at the All-Africa Games and has helped achieve a fourth-place finish for the Botswana women's team at the World Karate Championships.

"If you don't do a sport, it's easy to get involved in other things, like drinking," says Ngope, who's 29. "And if you're drinking, it's easy to get AIDS. A man will say that AIDS stands for American Idea for

there believe that muscles compromise a woman's femininity and contact sports put her fertility at risk. In traditional Setswana society, boys were out and active, herding cattle and collecting firewood; girls cooked, and bore and cared for children. The most popular sport for girls is a legacy of British colonialism called netball, a prissy strain of basketball in which dribbling is prohibited. It's as likely to find a place on the Olympic program as snooker.

But more than anything, AIDS is making female sport in Botswana, rare to begin with, less and less practicable. More than one in every three women between 15 and 25 is HIV-positive, and the percentage of women being infected is twice that of men. Even if a woman dodges the epidemic, its ripple will touch her, for she will be expected to look after the sick and take in the orphaned. If the scourge continues at its current pace, demographers predict that two thirds of the current population's 15-year-olds will die. Of Botswana's failure ever to send a woman to the Olympics, AIDS is a cause. Of the difficulty Botswana women have in telling a man no, AIDS is a symptom.

In these bleak circumstances Goitsemodimo Dikinya runs. At 17, she's already Botswana's female national champion in the 200 and 400 meters and a member of the 4 x 100 relay team that placed fifth at the 1999 All-Africa Games. She has

dreamed of running competitively from the time she was 10, when she first watched her elders do so and cried when she was told she was too young to join them. In her home of Lethakane, a village of mud huts and thatched roofs, schoolmates post themselves at 100-meter intervals when she trains, to urge her on her way.

Goitsemodimo is at a tipping point. She is fetching in the school blues of Lethakane Senior Secondary, and in the courtyard during lunch hour boys send pointed flirtations

In 1995, Weil-Curiel helped found a group to ban those countries that don't send women to the Games.

her way. Will she get an early start on motherhood, as so many of her peers do, within marriage or without? Will AIDS—referred to as "snatch and bury" in the local vernacular—make another victim of her? Or will she fulfill the destiny augured by her selection in 1999 as her country's Junior Sports Female of the Year? The answer rests in her first name, which means God Knows.

Her mother bore 10 other children to her father, who used to work in the diamond mines that blot the horizon outside

Discouraging Sex. Or that he must sleep with a virgin to be cured of the disease."

The only man in her life is her coach, who lives down the street and has trained her since she was five. "I had a boyfriend," she says, "but I caught him cheating on me, and I didn't want to catch AIDS."

From behind her fence, Ngope fixes an eye on 2004 and Athens. If karate is there, she says she will be, too. But she'll be 33, and that is an optimistic life expectancy for Botswana women of her generation.

Women in the Games

THE WOMAN, a lawyer in Paris, holds up a copy of the Olympic Charter streaked with fluorescent highlight marks. "This is our Bible," Linda Weil-Curiel says. "We know it by heart. We are asking the IOC to do nothing more than abide by its own charter."

The IOC governs itself by a document of thunderous idealism. The charter holds that "any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, sex or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement." Those words accounted for South Africa's ostracism from the Games for 21 years because of its racist policies. So in 1995 Weil-Curiel helped found a group, Atlanta Plus, to shame the IOC into abiding by its own high-mindedness and banning those countries that don't send women to the Games for whatever reason, whether cultural or religiously sanctioned gender apartheid.

The IOC has sent observers to the Islamic Women's Games, and that causes Weil-Curiel to bristle, for she believes such emissaries legitimize segregation by sex. She bristles, too, at the IOC's stance toward Afghanistan, a stance that she sees as muddled and spineless.

The Afghanis won't participate in these Olympics, and it's not entirely clear why. The IOC has cited the failure of the United Nations to recognize the Taliban. It has cited the ongoing civil war, which has

For women only Segregated sports facilities are thriving in Iran, attracting conservatives and developing coaches.

forced the national Olympic committee to flee the country. Then late last month a member of the IOC's executive board actually echoed the arguments of Atlanta Plus, rechristened Atlanta-Sydney Plus, and asserted that Afghanistan would be barred because the Taliban's treatment of women violates the Olympic Charter. Yet why are the Saudis and the emirates of the Persian Gulf not beyond the pale? Weil-Curiel asks. Though they eventually rescinded the invitation, why did members

Mascagni Stivachtis says the IOC can only do so much, and she disagrees with the call of Atlanta-Sydney Plus for a boycott. If the IOC neglects to use the Olympic Charter as a cudgel, it's only because the committee feels more urgent work must be done. "One of our main duties is to develop sport for women," she says. "In some countries we need more time to bring about change and integration. If sport has to be practiced separately rather than mixed, that's an entry point. We can't change culture overnight."

"We need more time to bring about change and integration," says the IOC's Mascagni Stivachtis.

of the IOC invite to Sydney as observers two representatives of the Taliban, who use sports stadiums to make public spectacle of torture and execution?

In Switzerland, in her office in a chateau by Lake Geneva, another woman speaks from a different perspective. Katia Mascagni Stivachtis heads the IOC's department of women's advancement. According to an analysis by the *Los Angeles Times*, the IOC collects annual revenues of \$900 million, mostly in TV and sponsorship revenue, yet it puts barely 3% of its income into training athletes and coaches. Scarcely a quarter of that portion—\$7.6 million—goes to the developing world, where women most need help.

Mascagni Stivachtis admires what Faezeh Hashemi is doing in Iran: "You can agree with her or not. But to achieve something you must have ambition, a vision and be willing to fight. I think she is very brave."

TOURAN SHADPOUR wears industrial-strength *hejab*—the chador, the tentlike black wrap that preserves the female form as the mystery the mullahs prefer. A lecturer in physical education at a college in Tehran, she produces a tattered copy of the official program from a long-ago World Track and Field Championships. She opens to an inside page, careful to fold back the program's cover so that it ob-

scures a photo of her at age 25, hair presumably flowing, neck presumably ripe. But the text alongside the photo she leaves unobscured, and it reveals that in 1977 she was among the best female track and field athletes in Asia.

Two years later the revolution fixed Shadpour's personal bests in amber. She never competed again. She is still the Iranian women's record holder in the 100 and 200 meters.

"I hope that someday my records will fall," she says. "I hope to see one of my students break them." □

