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Gliding down the slopes

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Gliding down the slopes

Women skiers: a national, athletic and tourism issue from 1927 and 1939¹

Michaël Attali, Natalia Bazoge, Sandrine Jamain-Samson et Jean Saint-Martin

- 1 As with many athletic disciplines, the inter war years was a time for change in the history of the sport of skiing. At the time of the first Winter Olympic Games in 1924, held in Chamonix and the creation of the Fédération Française de Ski (FFS – French Ski Federation), the notion of competition overshadowed concerns for practicality, tourism and public health initially linked to the sport and its practice. Through encouragement from the Austrian school *The Arlberg* and A. Lunn (1930), inventor of the slalom and downhill slalom, alpine skiing was recognised in 1928 by the Fédération Internationale du Ski (International Skiing Federation – FIS). Prior to World War One (Moralès, 2005), after 1918 women skiers were tolerated but encountered resistance for access to alpine skiing and competition (Terret, 2005). Moreover, the FFS progressive abandonment of Nordic skiing events for women that were gradually eliminated and replaced with downhill slalom races led to examination of what affects skiing had on the body. Gender standards were changing (Bard, 1998), the maternal role was encouraged (Cova, 1997) and as such the participation of women in competitions needed analysis and led to rhetorical questions concerning justification and rejection.
- 2 Despite limited media exposure², it was important to identify what place women skiers held and to define what kind of activity would be made available to them and/or that they would be interested in. In this sense, the history of gender (Scott, 1988) attempted to go beyond the perpetual symbol of the dual opposition; man - woman leaving room for interpretation of progress in social interaction between the sexes (Sohn, 2003). It then became possible to present the views as well as the under-lying factors in a power struggle that affected the integration of women skiers on a social scale.
- 3 Involvement in a sport in a mountainous region also contributed to defining the symbol of its male and female participants. Gender standards added to the image of female skiers in terms of their geographic origins (urban or rural mountain areas) by way of the differences between regions in higher or lower altitudes. The territory also involved acclimatization for practice and was dominated by influential conceptions

that involved strategy of movement (Körner, Walter, 1996). Of course the tourism factor that emerged around the ski resorts encouraged the promotion of access for the public at large and especially the female skiers who became the ambassadors of the sport (Attali, Bazoge, Gautier, 2009). Whether innovative in form or traditional in practice, this study aims at examining the different elements of the reorganisation of alpine skiing representations and to understand the diversity within its very essence in terms of what could be expected from a woman in motion. With this goal in mind, all the local printed media was analysed³ and compared to specialty magazines and technical documentation dedicated to skiing during the thirties.

The call of the mountain

A social event...

- 4 As early as the 1920s, female skiers were illustrated in the local press and also held an important place in the FFS journal, the *Revue du Ski*. More than a mere sporting event, a clarification of this analysis is required in order identify the means used, directly and indirectly, to promote the activity that went beyond the notion of competition performance.
- 5 The use of illustrations of female skiers was an interesting clue. When female skiers appeared, they were most often represented in a pose, skis over the shoulder or on their feet but very rarely in motion. The image of the posing society woman skier established the gender standards of the delicate yet elegant woman as the perfect example of a legend: “Under a silhouette that tries for a masculine look, haven’t these two young female athletes kept all their femininity?”⁴
- 6 Commentary such as this was recurrent in the press and skiing was considered, as with other social activities to be a symbol for the integration of social codes and standards.
- 7 To avoid any transgression, advocates complied and initially, enforced this point of view to ensure the necessary adhesion in the promotion of the sport. Photographs of women published in the *Revue du Ski* were no exception to the rule: always posed and dressed, the skis were the only visible clue to the activity that the women were supposedly practicing whereas numerous photographs showed the men in motion⁵. The quantity of articles on feminine skiing fashion was also an indication of the importance of opinion. Articles portraying silk stockings and wool tunics, reminders of the bathing costume or the Paris election of the most elegant woman wearing a winter sport outfit was throughout the press⁶.
- 8 Geographic origins of participants were a strong indication of viewpoints. In fact, the expression winter-holiday maker was often used to refer to a more urban population that migrated to the mountains for recreation and pleasure in a natural environment that was often seen as purifying and therefore helped maintain a distinct cultural identity that defined socialisation for the upper classes (Marais, 1986). At the end of the 1920s and early 1930s, other than the practical restrictions linked to the local Alpine population (Allen, 2007), alpine skiers and especially women skiers didn’t fully support the strictly athletic symbol of skiing (Vertinsky, 1994) and developed their own form of activity that was part tradition and part innovation:

“Sport is competition, championships, performance, records and is therefore a sustained effort [...] A weak man should hold back, a woman should abstain altogether [...]

Obviously, this does not mean that we blame a young girl for wanting to practice sport rather than being on a dance floor. When rain isn't an issue, fresh air, sunshine and physical activity are beneficial means to help maintain physical health. However, there are other ways. [...] The results obtained in the physical transformation of participants would surprise no one. Some remain frail while others become manlier”⁷.

- 9 Some sporting events were also reserved for winter-holiday makers. Widespread advice was given as a means of encouragement; equipment, transportation and ski lessons. Based on the example of views on the other sport activities in the Dauphiné and Savoyard regions, promotion of the region began for city dwellers (Bazoge, Attali, Grosset, Delorme, 2012): “to take full advantage of the mountains in winter, skiing is essential. A pair of skis for the layperson is two bulky planks of wood but for those who know how to use them it's a form of liberation. [...] So, if you don't know how to use this 'wood', take advantage of the ski school, created by the Grenoble Tourist Office”⁸. The *Petit Dauphinois* and *La Dépêche Dauphinoise* were seen as propagandists for winter sport that targeted seasonal urban populations.
- 10 Efforts had to be made to entice new groups of people to try a new activity where tourism issues were crucial to the region more so in the mid 1930s with the arrival of the Front Populaire (Ory, 1994), when mobilisation in favour of leisure was developing. The FFS then became a relay as well as a booster. It helped spotlight this kind of sport as a legitimate activity for an increasing number of people. Using the idea of purification outdoors added to issues of public health gave the sport new meaning in the eyes of the female population.
- 11 Because of these points of view a decisive direction was taken. In fact, even if the aristocratic model of skiing was not completely removed, little by little, its influence decreased to be replaced by the athletic symbol, which would become the norm for men and women. Skiing gave new meaning to the call of the mountain giving it more clarity and making the mountains an logical option.

... a mobilisation for sport

- 12 With its social distinction, skiing excluded a large part of the population; methods of practice were still a work in progress at the beginning of the 1930s and were replaced by a sport alliance that would propose a new form of standardisation. An increasing interest from the clubs outside the alpine area was an indication of progress at play. Up to that time, organisations were exclusively found in towns and villages in the mountains but later, changes occurred when prestigious clubs in urban regions such as (Ski-Club Parisien – SCP), Ski-Club de Marseille or Ski-Club de Toulon) began to take an interest.
- 13 As a new advocate, the SCP played an important part attracting by new participants. Within the realm of one organisation, it brought together activities such as play, leisure and sport, where a unique and multi-faceted dynamic developed. The club's promotion attracted most of its skiers from the French ski team, especially Emile Allais, albeit a native of Megève but most importantly, a symbol of French skiing. Gaining the interest of the best skiing had to offer and placing the Parisian elite in the spotlight, the Paris

club contributed to the creation of a model of skiing with urban influence. The female Parisian population rapidly became the centre of attention at the expense of local women skiers who only rarely made it into the media spotlight. The Parisian women skier became a model of the city girl skier and more generally an example of the most accomplished of “Parisians that go to winter sports are happy”⁹. The combination of city-dweller and mountain-dweller helped regulate how the public perceived the sport. The development of downhill races and slalom races gave women snow skiers an opportunity to test themselves against the women skiers who were natives of the ski resort areas who in turn had to take on the compulsory model from the cities.

14 In the mid 1930s, the popularity of sporting events became a socially accepted fact that led to an increase in popular events: “Even if not everyone skis, everyone dreams of skiing, everyone talks about skiing, women more than anyone. That is why it is so successful! What would skiing be without female enthusiasm, to be accepted with all that is athletic and futile?”¹⁰. Though there was little change in the number of participants, the number of enthusiasts was almost excessive in the sense that it was believed dangerous for the French people. In this situation, skiing took a slightly different direction. In fact, its promotion was based on competition and performance and was commented on by the local press as much as the leaders of the FFS. An activity that takes place in a natural environment as well as its representation of natural heritage from an upper class symbol seemed to contribute to awareness of a sport activity that women would now have full access to. Even if there were some obstacles from social stereotypes, instead of being a hindrance they were a plus in positioning skiing in the world of sport.

15 The January 1st 1936 issue of the *Petit Dauphinois* dedicated to winter sport is a perfect illustration of these views. The editorial written by Doctor François Lacq, president of the FFS at that time, gave a testimonial, used by its advocates, of the importance of the sport:

“This fascinating sport helped us discover a new way of life – with it comes a new zest for life and with this new activity we can rebuild the lives of our mountainous populations, enjoy its riches that can, at times, be useful for happiness.

Yes, skiing can be triumphant, brilliant, and magnificent”¹¹.

16 A genuine ode to snow and more so to winter sports, the issue dedicated a section to the analysis of female skiers. The summary was an authentic study of exaggerated metaphors linking athletic skiing to perspectives of emancipation, all the while maintaining the necessary concerns for public health and ensuring social stability that would not be questioned:

“Snow fever is not a contagious disease; it is an illness in the most compassionate sense of the word. Parisians become afflicted with it unawares [...]. Futile temptation is overpowered by ambition as noble as the Amazons conquering the horse in 1900: wearing trousers.

What once was clothing strictly reserved for men has reconciled the sexes in a world that now has an open mind.

Members of Parliament may keep women out of voting booths but outdoors, with skis on their feet, they have taken the first step toward emancipation and on the slopes the establishment won't catch up to them any time soon.

[...] In the meantime, leaving for the mountains, Madam submits to an inspection in front of the mirror while her husband “studies” the Arlberg masters and checks on indicators [...].”¹²

- 17 Aesthetics, technique and frailty were characteristics of an activity that had potential and was no doubt in the public interest with resources that advocates used to develop interest in cities more so than in mountain populations. The symbol of the female skier was definitely Parisian as the female population in the mountainous regions were less likely to be tempted by the activity.

French skiing: a feminine elite

The first feminine Ski Derby

- 18 Accounts from the various newspapers were proof of the progressive development of skiing as a sport with the patronage of the FFS, which brought vitality to the Fédération Dauphinoise de Ski (FDS) and increased the number of competitions.
- 19 As early as the 1920s, women were participating. Even though there weren't very many female skiers, they took part in Nordic ski races that were shorter than the men's races and competed with junior skiers or beginners. Some races were mixed; either relays, ski cross or with rules pertaining to special races such as the Montifiore Cup, organised by the Touring Club of France. After 1927, a downhill race for women was created in the annual programme of the FDS. The results were publicised in the local press but commentary was restricted to women's performances as opposed to the men's results, which were analysed in great detail.
- 20 The local press was in keeping with popular opinion concerning the image of women in these competitions. Though women were not totally ignored, they appeared only rarely in sport columns. Male athletes such as E. Allais was a popular name on the editorial page leaving very little space, if only, a few lines for the women. The question of reader perception of women's performances therefore came into play. Looking back at the results of the Wengen race in 1936¹³, E. Allais won his downhill race at the same time as Zizi du Manoir. The newspaper wrote two lines on page two about du Manoir's results where Allais, on page one was the focus of attention. Female slalom and downhill skiers were virtually invisible in the papers even if their iconography was splashed throughout the newspapers.
- 21 Furthermore, commentary was mostly stereotypical and strongly outweighed performances made by women skiers. Grace, elegance and amiability were often placed in the forefront for women where technique and performance were the topic of discussion for the men. The *Revue du Ski* was no exception to the rule. The write-up of the international race in Kandahar in 1933 was a perfect illustration of their point of view. Analysis of the male skiers' race results dealt almost exclusively with physical resistance, technical difficulty and muscular strength. Discussion of the female skiers was dominated by poise and elegance¹⁴. This was also the case in documentation concerning alpine skiing. Almost every written word examined masculine technique¹⁵, only one document attested to this with a (the christiana glide uphill) photograph illustrating the female skier¹⁶ and the only other testimony was a brief mention of the specifics required to prepare for the summer: "The female skiers who aren't accustomed to walking in flat shoes should get to it. For one month above all else, they should work on the flexibility of their ankles or even consider getting a reasonable amount of mechanotherapy for a low angle between the foot and the lower leg. This is crucial in order to progress in the sport of skiing"¹⁷. In much the same tone, the *Petit*

Dauphinois made similar commentary at the expense of analysing technique. Comments following the finale of the Fémina Cup in 1935¹⁸ were illustrative: “an initial observation: the wonderful team spirit of these female competitors, mutual kindness and kind of gentle desire to help one another! At the finish line each one of the competitors showed their interest in the other’s result, giving the impression that it was a team race. It was absolutely charming”¹⁹.

Joy and sadness among the French female skiers in the thirties

- 22 Despite the stereotyping, opinion whether federal or journalistic, contributed to a less traditional model of femininity by highlighting courage and perseverance.
- 23 In the *République de l’Isère et du Sud-Est*, enthusiasm and admiration for performance of the women skiers was consistent. They routinely presented regional race results and listed ranks of the women skiers for each type of race. Female athletes, famous or unknown²⁰ to the public were given exposure by the daily paper where women in other sport activities remained on the side-lines. From time to time, the paper went beyond paying tribute to performance. It would take on a cause to defend some types of races in total contrast to other sport newspapers or general opinion. At a time when the Olympic 800 metre race at the Amsterdam Games in 1928 was controversial, admiration for a young woman who fell during a cross country event was remarkable²¹.
- 24 As the number of races increased with time, comments turned more and more toward female skiing skills particularly during the Fémina Cup and more so for the downhill race:
- 25 “The excellence of these women skiers who qualified for this most important finale was such that it was such a close race, spectators were completely stunned by the brilliance, courage and sheer boldness of the French elite of female skiing. Obviously there were a number of falls but the times recorded further on were proof that the performances deserved all the attention they received”²².
- 26 In contrast, the *Petit Dauphinois* whose articles were most often written by specialists like Georges Blanchon²³ who highlighted women skiers but was ruthless where their performances were concerned. Technically, their level was regularly deemed weaker than male skiers to validate what was required of a true champion or even a hero. For this reason during the elimination race at the 1935 Fémina Cup, the future winner of the cup Miss Gravier, “squatted down low on her skis” made a descent that was « quick of course but had no style »²⁴. During the FDS annual competition in 1935, the time recorded by Miss Gravier placed her fourth behind three male skiers made this commentary questionable. The *Dépêche Dauphinoise* relayed the trend by boasting the bravery of the women skiers: “after a splendid downhill race at breath-taking speeds, this lovely athlete passed through the many obstacles on the run with confidence. She took her turns with astonishing style”²⁵.
- 27 The national journal took a mid-line view indifferently using the same wording in French to describe male and female skiers (racers, competitors, downhill specialists). In this case, female skiers were given an equal status as athletes as well as champion status even if ambiguity was a part of their classification. Worthy of “rockets”, the term “amazons” rang out as a symbol of femininity and of Greek mythology heroine warriors (Attali, Bazoge, Gautier, 2009). Deemed too feminine when their levels were insufficient

and not feminine enough when their champion status was indisputable, female skiers were caught up in a vicious circle of restrictive social standards.

- 28 In comparison to female skiers from other countries, French female skiers could not escape judgement when it came to their accomplishments. Prior to 1939, women's skiing teams didn't participate in the major international competitions. Despite the performances of Marguerite Bouvier in the 1930s²⁶, J. Dieterlen²⁷ believed that athletes from the mountainous regions would naturally ensure the success of French feminine skiing:

"France doesn't have female athletes that can combat the Swiss or German skiers and it's not just a question of pure technique, it's also a question of race and the mere physical nature of these women. [...]. They belong on the cover of women's fashion magazines; they are city girls and that is the only thing we can blame them for. They do not have the physical strength needed that is the apanage of girls from the mountains"²⁸.

- 29 At a time of geopolitical tension, urgent action had to be taken for French women skiers to earn their spot on an international level. Every year the press would speak of the regretful absence of French women skiers in competitions even though they continued to examine their weaknesses:

"[...] you have to wonder why a national feminine team doesn't exist especially if recruitment doesn't take place in the country and in the mountains where female skiers have the muscle and resistance of an Erna Steurl from Grindelwald or a Christel Cranz from Fribourg"²⁹.

- 30 In 1939, the results of the first French women's ski team were not very good. Battling against German domination, journalists reiterated their questions concerning the choices made for the team members and especially those from Paris:

"[...] in order to have what it takes to go all the way, wouldn't it be better, to search among the ranks of the hardy country girls from the Alps and Pyrenees, girls in a class with Allais, de Burnet, de Seigneur?

[...] competition skiing has the same demands for women as it does for men. It's as much a question of character and lineage as it is a question of technique. And even if I can't deny these charming girls from the French ski team an opportunity to one day challenge Christel Cranz for her crown, I would like our country girls to get the same chance"³⁰.

Conclusion

- 31 Between 1927 and 1939, with sport and tourism issues on the line, the development of alpine skiing in France maintained an impression of ambivalence toward female representation. The model of the female winter-holiday maker took over public opinion without totally eliminating the ideal of the amazon. With competitions on the increase, local alpine journalists continued to have conflicting opinions. While G. Blanchon promoted the emancipation of women's alpine skiing in his articles in the *Petit Dauphinois*, in *La République de l'Isère* followed their exploits in regional and/or national races but the *Dépêche Dauphinoise* paid little attention to women's skiing. On the threshold of the Second World War, women skiers had their place in newspaper articles. Nevertheless, despite the leaders and cross-country racers with their pictures splashed across the front pages of newspapers, women skiers always came in second when it came to the exploits of male skiers. Skiing developed a unique platform whether in the press or on a national level giving women athletes their own

recognition. In fact, the environment surrounding this activity, as much as the methods of practice offered new perspectives for women dedicated to sport in France in the inter-war years.

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NOTES

1. This endeavour benefitted from government aide that came from the Agence Nationale de la Recherche under the programme “Investing in the Future” Labex ITEM – ANR – 10 – LABX 50 – 01.
2. *Eve*, journal féminin illustré du dimanche, was seen as a pioneer at the time of its launch in April 1924, one column entitled “La femme et les sports” (Women and sports) (Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo, Jamain-Samson, Bazoge, 2010).
3. *Le Petit Dauphinois*, *La République de l’Isère et du Sud-Est* and *La Dépêche Dauphinoise* were systematically studied during the winter season (November – March) between 1927 and 1939.
4. Photograph illustrated the page “La femme, l’enfant, le foyer”, *Le Petit Dauphinois*, January 9, 1929, p. 5.
5. Front page photographs published in this journal were perfect examples of this representation. Cf. example from *La Revue du Ski*, n°2, February 1933, cover page.
6. ANONYMOUS, “The loveliest skiing outfit”, *Le Petit Dauphinois*, December 15, 1931. The importance of elegance was symbolic of skiing outfits and made just so through the work of Parisian designers.
7. BARDEL P., “La critique du sport féminin”, *La République de l’Isère et du Sud-Est*, February 2, 1929.
8. ANONYMOUS, “Le bel hiver !”, *La République de l’Isère et du Sud-Est*, December 24, 1930.
9. Front page photograph, *Le Petit Dauphinois*, December 16, 1931.
10. MAY J., “Letter to a friend”, *Le Petit Dauphinois*, January 1st 1936, p. 4.
11. Dr LACQ F., “1936. Triomphe de la neige”, *Le Petit Dauphinois*, January 1st 1936, p. 1.
12. FANGEAT J., “Fièvre Blanche à Paris”, *Le Petit Dauphinois*, January 1st 1936, p. 4.
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16. HERMANN, A. et DIETERLEN, J., 1936. – *Le ski pour tous, ce que tout skieur doit savoir*, Paris, Flammarion, p. 119.
17. DUCIA, T. et REINL, K., 1935. – *Le ski d’aujourd’hui*, Paris, Robert Lallemand, p. 122.
18. The nine contestants of the finale of the Fémina Cup were on the front page of the newspaper with a photograph and three columns at the bottom centre of the page.
19. PAROI, P., “Comment elles ont couru”, *Le Petit Dauphinois*, February 18, 1935, p. 5.
20. Analysis of the women’s races was nonetheless often limited to publishing results. It might have been a means of encouragement for the young women who in some cases were taking their first steps on the slopes.
21. ANONYME, “Le ski à Saint-Véran (Htes-Alpes)”, *La République de l’Isère et du Sud-Est*, January 21, 1929.
22. Correspondant, “At Villard de Lans, Georgette Galtier from Grenoble won her second finale at the Fémina Cup”, *La République de l’Isère et du Sud-Est*, February 18, 1935.
23. At the end of the 1920s, Georges Blanchon was the president of the Alpes-Club just prior to becoming the General Secretary of the FDS and then of the FFS in the mid 1930s. In 1937 he coordinated the world skiing championship in Chamonix.
24. ANONYMOUS, “Mlle Juliette Gravier won the eliminatory race for the third time in Montgenèvre at the Fémina Cup”, *Le Petit Dauphinois*, January 15, 1935, p. 5.
25. ANONYMOUS, “Dauphiné regional ski championship”, *La Dépêche Dauphinoise*, February 10, 1936, p. 4.
26. She was regularly in the top five in international races during this period.

27. Editor of *La revue du ski* and an important contributor to the changes that took place within the FFS in the early 1930s.
28. DIETERLEN J., “6th Grand Prix du Ski-Club in Paris (Megève, January 6-7, 1939)”, *La revue du ski*, 1, January 20, 1939, pp. 16-17.
29. FRISON-ROCHE, R., “Le Grand Prix du ski club in Paris. Double German victory”, *Le Petit Dauphinois*, January 8, 1938, p. 7.
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RÉSUMÉS

Following a study of the introduction of alpine skiing in the mountainous regions of the French Alps, this research hopes to understand the women's role in the sport. This analysis will demonstrate how skiing progressed initially, seen as a sport of social excellence would gradually integrate sport standards. The article highlights how this most unique activity gave women an opportunity to participate in sport when they were still only partially active due to society dictates of that time period. Skiing advocates used stereotypical symbols linked to femininity to promote the sport with the belief that as early as the 1930s, women had to develop technical skills, perform and develop a kind of excellence that young girls could identify with. At this time in history, tourism was the key and women skiers were crucial in becoming a captive audience. Alpine skiing belonged to both tradition and innovation and was an original part of the 1930s that raised the question of accessibility to sport for women in field dominated, for the most part by men.

INDEX

Keywords : Alpine skiing, gender, mountainous regions, leisure

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