From belly-flops to gold medals

Elizabeth (Liz) Ferris, diver, doctor and campaigner for gender equality in sport, was born on 19th November 1940 in Somerset. She was brought up in central London and was a member of Mermaids Swimming Club, based in Hampstead, which had a tradition of training female Olympic swimmers and divers. Her introduction to diving was far from promising - she apparently belly-flopped on her first attempt - but with training and perseverance she quickly improved and won her first national title in 1957. The following year she competed in two major international events, finishing sixth in the three-metre springboard event at the European championships in Budapest, and gaining the bronze medal at the British Empire and Commonwealth games in Cardiff.

Ferris made the British team for the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, and won the bronze medal in the three-metre springboard event. The following year Ferris won gold medals in the springboard and platform events in Sofia, Bulgaria, and was recognised by the Amateur Swimming Association as Britain’s diver of the year and honoured with the George Heam trophy. Her last major event came in 1962, where she won a silver medal in the British Empire and Commonwealth games in Perth, Australia.

A medical career and a campaign for change

During this time, Ferris had been studying medicine at the University of London, and she retired from diving in 1962 to concentrate on her career. She qualified as a doctor at the Middlesex Hospital in 1965 and then worked in hospitals in London and Gloucestershire.

While Ferris’s career was in medicine she remained active on a number of other fronts. She helped to establish both the British Olympians Club and the World Olympians Association as networks for former competitors. She also used her position as a former Olympian with medical knowledge to promote the cause of women’s sport. In 1976 she was a part of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)’s first conference on women in sport. At this event, women made up only 20.7% of the total competitors at the summer Olympics, and 20.6% at the winter Olympics, and they were allowed to compete in far fewer sports than men. Ferris quickly became known as a campaigner for change. She published the article "Sportswomen and medicine," published in the Olympic Review in 1979. In this, she challenged beliefs that menstruation, motherhood and hormones had an impact on sportswomen’s performances, and she criticised the IOC’s sex testing system. She criticised the growing practice of testosterone doping, with its awful side effects for sportswomen, saying that: “It is a sad reflection on sport today that such risks are considered worthwhile and necessary.” This pushed some sporting bodies to decide to review their gender verification techniques in the 1980s.

Equality at the Olympic Games

Ferris’s campaigning was eventually successful, particularly when she helped defend the right of the South African athlete Caster Semenya to compete as a women after her high-profile gender test in 2009. Because of this, the IOC published new rules on female hyperandrogenism in 2012, and while these are still open to criticism, they are a major advance on the old sex tests.

Ferris’s contribution to the cause of women at the Olympics was widely recognised. The IOC awarded her the Olympic order in 1980, and in 2011 the British Olympic Association (BOA) awarded her their first lifetime achievement award. The BOA’s chairman, Lord Moynihan, explained that Ferris’s dedication to sport “on and off the field of play” and her medical work as the basis for the award, and Ferris conveyed a clear sense of her achievements in her acceptance, saying:

“Women are almost at parity at the Olympic Games in terms of the number of competitors, only just under half, but we’ve really made huge strides over the last 15 years in getting female athletes competing on an equal level at the Games ... I hope winning this award will encourage girls in sport and show that women have an important role to play.”

A lasting legacy

It was fitting that this achievement came less than a year before the 2012 London Olympic Games, the first at which all sports were opened to women. Sadly, Ferris didn’t live to see this. She had been suffering from breast cancer since 2008, and she died from the disease on 12th April 2012, three months before the Olympics started.

Ferris’s international sporting achievements - an Olympic bronze medal and two empire games medals - were relatively modest, although it is worth noting that at the time of her death no British woman had won an Olympic medal in diving since Ferris’s bronze in Rome. Her legacy, however, rested in her tireless work to improve opportunities for women in the Olympic games, and her scientific work on the biology of gender, which helped to change the IOC’s restrictive and blunt definitions of male and female bodies. Any claims that the Olympic games have towards gender equality, and a scientific understanding of the gendered body rest, in part, on Ferris’s work.


Sources
