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A SPORT WITH UNTAPPED POTENTIAL TO EMPOWER WOMEN

Mika Härmäläinen

This paper argues that the sport of ski jumping possesses the untapped potential to empower women. It also recommends ways in which this potential should be realised. The untapped potential of ski jumping lies in the notion that, under two independent conditions, women are able to jump as far as men. The first condition is that women start from a higher gate than men. The second is that women and men start from the same gate, but compete on a ski flying hill. In order to realise the untapped potential, it is recommendable to take two steps to transform the practice of ski jumping. The first step is to introduce a mixedz-pair competition for the 2014–2015 season. The second step is to introduce a sex-integrated individual competition for the 2016–2017 season. The sex-integrated competition can be either compensated or non-compensated.

KEYWORDS discrimination; empowerment; gender equality; ski jumping; winter sports

Introduction

Ski jumping is currently a significant sport in Western societies for two reasons. First, the 2014 Sochi Winter Games will open ski jumping for the first time to women at the Olympic level, leaving the Nordic Combined as the only event that excludes women from the Olympics. Significantly, women were not allowed to participate in any event at the inaugural modern Olympics in Athens in 1896 (Schneider 2000, 123; Weaving 2012, 229–230).

Second, ski jumping possesses the untapped potential to empower women, based on the notion that, in this sport, women are capable of relevantly similar athletic performance to men; that is, under certain conditions, women are able to jump as far as men. I have not observed this kind of potential in any other traditionally ‘masculine’ sport¹, such as football or track

and field. This is significant because women still face discrimination concerning distributive justice in the realm of sport. In most cases, when women play sports, they receive lesser wages than men. Additionally, women attract smaller audiences and fewer sponsors than their male counterparts. I will, therefore, focus on this matter in relation to the significance of ski jumping.

The purpose of this paper is, first, to argue that ski jumping possesses the untapped potential to empower women, and, second, to recommend how this potential should be realised. I propose that we should take two steps to transform the current practice of ski jumping. The first step is to add a mixed-pair competition for the 2014–2015 season, and the second is to add an individual sex-integrated competition for the 2016–2017 season.

The Olympic Charter underscores that the promotion of gender equality through sports is a worthy endeavour. One of the fundamental principles of Olympism 'is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity' (International Olympic Committee (IOC) 2011). In other words, Olympism does not merely accept the idea that sport is compatible with societal ends; rather, it also aims to promote the good of humankind. More specifically, one task of the IOC is to further gender equality. The IOC aims 'to encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures with a view to implementing the principle of equality of men and women' (IOC 2011, 14). Next, I will specify the ways in which my proposal would improve women's position.

Discrimination against Women at the Elite Sport Level

The focus of this paper lies on reducing discrimination against women at the elite level in sports. For instance, when women play a sport at the elite level, it is likely that they attract fewer spectators, receive less media coverage, and earn less income than men who play the same game. When Forbes listed the world's 100 highest-paid athletes in 2013, only three women were on the list (Badenhausen 2013). This discrimination is not detrimental solely for the top women athletes; rather, it also concerns women who will never be Olympic medallists.

The distinction that Jane English makes between basic and scarce benefits of sport helps us to understand the extensive impact of discrimination in elite-level sport.² English claims that everyone has a right to the basic benefits of sport, which include health, recreation, self-respect, and character development. Obviously, elite sport is not about basic benefits; contrarily, it concerns scarce benefits, such as money and fame. Only few can claim these resources; nevertheless, they affect all women through the mechanism of group

identification. Members of suppressed groups identify with the success and failures of other group members. When women athletes are deprived of equal media coverage and salaries, this leads men and women to believe that the latter are naturally inferior. However, if women would receive approximately half of the scarce benefits, this oppressive conception would vanish. Because we believe that women have a right to self-respect, we can justify why women should have access to half of the scarce benefits (English 1995, 284–286, 288).

A significant reason why women do not currently receive approximately half of the scarce benefits of sport is that many modern sports appreciate the qualities that, statistically, men possess to a greater extent than women: strength, speed, height, and muscle volume (see Tamburrini and Tännsjö 2005, 183; Tännsjö 2000, 103). For instance, men excel in football, track and field, and ice hockey.

Mary Jo Kane has identified two general approaches – the liberal and the radical – that aim to change the current situation of male dominance. The liberal approach operates within existing sporting structures, whereas the radical approach steps outside of mainstream sports in order to shake these structures and alter patriarchal values (Kane 1995, 194–195). In this paper, my strategy for empowerment is, in a sense, a mix of the liberal and radical traditions. My aim is to reform an existing sport – ski jumping – but to do so in a way that preserves the qualities that are currently rewarded in this sport. Nevertheless, before there can be an appreciation of the proposed changes, there must first be an understanding of the sport of ski jumping.

The Characteristics of Ski Jumping

Ski jumping is a winter sport in which competitors jump from a ski jumping hill. They first sit on a starting bar, then glide down an inrun, take off, fly through the air, and, finally, land on an outrun. The hill size affects how far one can jump. In general, normal hills enable jumps of over 80 metres, large hills enable jumps of over 100 metres, and flying hills enable jumps of over 180 metres. Inrun length, in addition to wind and snow conditions, affects the length of jumps. The jury of each particular ski jumping contest controls the inrun length: lowering the starting bar decreases inrun speed and, hence, jump length, while levelling up the bar increases inrun speed and, hence, jump length. It is in the jury's interest to avoid jumps that are too long because jumpers would then land on the flat landing strip, which is dangerous. Before each round of a contest, the jury decides the inrun length according to the current circumstances (*Fédération Internationale de Ski (FIS) Encyclopedia*; Pfister 2007, 54–55).

The ranking system is based on the length of the jump, style, wind compensation, and gate compensation. The jury allocates points for these aspects and they are accumulated for the final result. Regarding the length of the jump, the further the jumper lands, the more distance points he or she gains. Style points are based on the judges' evaluations. Five judges appraise the jump, landing, and outrun, and the worst and best results are excluded. The wind compensation system means that a jumper receives bonus points for poor wind conditions, whereas points are deducted due to good wind conditions. Unlike in many other sports, such as running or football, headwind is preferable to tailwind. The gate compensation allows the jury to lower the starting bar during a round if jumps are expected to be too long. Awarding bonus points to jumpers who have to deal with the shorter inrun length compensates for this adjustment. Coaches also have the same option to adjust the bar for their jumpers during the round (FIS *Encyclopedia*; Pfister 2007, 54–55).

The Untapped Potential of Ski Jumping

There are two independent premises or conditions under which women are able to ski jump as far as men. In other words, one or the other must be fulfilled.

According to the first condition, equal jumps are possible if women are allowed to use a longer inrun length than men – that is, if they start from a higher gate. A recent competitive form of ski jumping, called the mixed-team competition, illustrates this fact. The Nordic World Ski Championships in Val di Fiemme in 2013 were first world championships that introduce the mixed-team competition. A mixed team consists of two female and two male jumpers. In the contest, there are two jumping groups for women and two for men. Each group includes one jumper from each team. Women are thus not competing directly against men, although comparison is possible. In the final round, eight female jumpers from the third group jumped an average distance of 98.3 metres from Gate 27, and eight male jumpers from the fourth group jumped an average distance of 98.6 metres from Gate 17. Sara Takanashi, a female Japanese ski jumper, achieved the longest jump in the contest – 106.5 metres from Gate 27 – and German ski jumper Richard Freitag performed the men's longest jump – 102.5 metres from Gate 17 (FIS 2013a). In summary, in the mixed-team competition in Val di Fiemme, many women were able to jump as far as men when they started 10 gates above the men's gate.

Two counterarguments challenge the significance of adjusting the inrun length. The first counterargument states that ski jumping possesses no rare empowerment potential: if compensation is made for women, then they become capable of similar performances as men in any sport. This would be

tantamount, for instance, to organising a sex-integrated 100-metre race in which men started 1.00 second after women.

However, this counterargument misses four crucial points about the character of ski jumping. First, much like the author of this article, the average televised ski jumping spectator does not observe a relevant difference between women's and men's performance due to different inrun lengths. For instance, American Sarah Hendrickson jumped 99 metres from Gate 27 in the first round of the mixed-team competition in Val di Fiemme, and Austrian Thomas Morgenstern jumped 99.5 metres from Gate 17 in the same round; however, I could not have inferred from their performances that Hendrickson had a longer inrun length. In contrast, the average spectator would easily be able to see that Usain Bolt, whose world record in the 100 metres is 9.58 seconds, runs faster than his countrywoman Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce if Bolt were to start the race after her. Fraser-Pryce's personal record in the 100-metre dash is 10.70 seconds, which is the fourth fastest among women in the world.³ To summarise, the underlying reason why we should introduce compensation into ski jumping and not into the 100-metre race is that we can better generate the impression of parity in ski jumping. The higher the impression of parity, the more deserved the compensated victory seems to be, which will lead to greater empowerment of women.

Appearances of performances take precedence over the actual performances in my answer. Thus, I presume a conception of a sport that allows, on certain premises, more emphasis on close contests and the concomitant 'sweet tension of uncertainty' (see Kretchmar 1975) than on a test of natural abilities. Bernard Suits (2010, 28) has stated in his famous phrase, 'playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles'. By creating less demanding obstacles for women in ski jumping, we can generate a close contest between athletes of different athletic skills. However, I am not stating that we can introduce sweet tension at any cost. Instead, I am only stating that gender equity seems to be one of those reasons.

Second, the compensation system utilises a mechanism that is already a part of the sport of ski jumping. To guarantee safe landings, the jury sets the starting gate to a specific level before each round, and it can also be adjusted during the rounds. Third, adding an extra compensation system for sex would not be anomalous in ski jumping because the sport has two prior compensation systems: wind and gate compensation. Fourth, the increased complexity that follows from the compensation system does not considerably diminish how well spectators can follow the sport. Ski jumping already has a complex ranking system, and Gertrund Pfister has stated that a largely lay audience can have problems understanding style measurements (Pfister 2007, 63).

The second counterargument states that victories that women gain through longer inrun length would not empower them because they would

feel that the compensation is undeserved.⁴ However, this counterargument overlooks that, merely from the viewpoint of their athletic abilities, neither have women deserved the Olympic gold medals that they have achieved in sex-segregated events. For instance, at the 2012 London Olympics, Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce won the Olympic gold medal in the 100-metre race, with a time of 10.75 seconds. At the Finnish National Championships in the same year, Visa Hongisto won the men's 100-metre dash with a time of 10.54 seconds. He did not qualify for the Olympics, although he performed better than Fraser-Pryce.

It is crucial to understand that in the previous example, I was demonstrating that a female athlete's victory in a sex-segregated sport would be undeserved without the context of our current society. Torbjörn Tännsjö (2000, 101) has claimed that we should not consider the societal connections at all: 'In sports it is crucial that the best person wins'. He goes on to argue that we should give up sex segregation in sports. Angela J. Schneider rightfully criticises that Tännsjö is missing the big picture: 'In a world that was fair, and where there was no systematic discrimination on the basis of sex, he [Tännsjö] would be right. But we do not live in that world' (Schneider 2000, 137). Thus, a female sprinter's Olympic gold in her own class is deserved in the context of our current society, and compensated sport victories would be deserved in the same sense. However, most are so accustomed to the system of sex segregation at the Olympics that it is regarded as almost natural. Therefore, the more there is the impression of parity of performances, the easier it is to convince athletes and spectators that compensated victories are likewise deserved.

According to the second condition, women can jump as far as men if both are jumping from ski flying hills. No gate adjustment is required, since women may be more suited to ski flying hills than to normal and large hills. This rationale is based on the essential qualities of a good athlete in this sport, which include, amongst other characteristics, explosive jumping power, ability for optimal flying position, and low body mass. Normal hills require a more explosive effort than flying hills, whereas flying capacities and low body mass are more crucial for flying hills. Statistically, women are lighter than men and might, therefore, be better suited for ski flying (see Gleaves 2010, 282–283; Vertinsky, Jette, and Hofmann 2009, 38–40). Consequently, Gerd von der Lippe's (2001) remark that ski jumping rewards 'slight build, a flexible body, good balance, a low centre of gravity, and the ability to focus – all qualities that seem to characterise female bodies and minds' might be most true in the context of ski flying (von der Lippe 2001, 1047, as cited in Vertinsky, Jette, and Hofmann 2009, 38).

The second condition has a hypothetical status because there is little evidence of whether or not women are actually better suited to ski flying than men. Women have jumped from ski flying hills infrequently (see Gleaves 2010, 283). We know that a woman's longest jump on a ski flying hill was performed

by Austrian Daniela Iraschko, who jumped 200 metres during practice on the ski flying hill of Kulm in 2003 (FIS Athletes). For men, the longest jump is 246.5 metres, performed by Norwegian Johan Remen Evensen on the ski flying hill of Vikersund in 2011. However, in order to refute or confirm the second condition, there is a need for more empirical evidence that can be directly compared.

The First Step: Mixed-pair Competition

The first step in realising the untapped potential of ski jumping is to introduce a mixed-pair competition for the 2014–2015 season. The paragon of this competitive form is the mixed-team competition; however, these events differ in three respects. First, in the mixed-pair competition, the ‘team’ or pair consists of one female and one male jumper, and these pairs compete against other pairs. The purpose of smaller teams is to increase intensity and spectator interest by bringing the sport to a more individual level: drama is heightened through more individual battle.

Second, members of a pair are allowed to represent different nationalities, which can improve women’s access to scarce ski jumping resources. The sport has differing competitive landscapes for females and males. At the international level, the top group of female jumpers is narrower and more dispersed than the top group of male jumpers, which is wider and closer. For instance, Austria may not have sufficient women jumpers to pair each of their numerous top male jumpers; therefore, Austrian top male jumpers may have to seek to be paired with women from other countries, which is likely to increase rewards and appreciation for female jumpers. Alternatively, the country could invest in developing its own ski jumping programme for women.

Third, the mixed-pair competition could be introduced in intensive tournament mode in order to attract spectators. The paragon would be the famous Four Hills Tournament, or *Vierschanzentournee*, which includes four large hill contests, two of which are located in Germany and the other two in Austria. This traditional New Year’s tournament has a prestigious history and attracts a vast number of spectators.

The Nordic Tournament – another, less iconic four-hills tournament – could be transformed into the mixed-pair contest format. This consists of four large hill contests, two of which are jumped in Finland and two in Norway. The Nordic Tournament could also be changed so that it culminates on the ski flying hill of Vikersund in Norway. Persuading the organisers to transform the Nordic Tournament may not be an insurmountable challenge. First, there is an example that illustrates that tournament mode can be successfully applied to new contexts. According to its organisers, the Tour de Ski, a cross-country

skiing tournament introduced in 2006, has managed to get good TV ratings (FIS 2013b). Second, the Finnish and Norwegian governments might be eager to support a sporting practice that promotes gender equality as one of its main goals.

The Second Step: Sex-integrated Individual Competition

The second step in realising the untapped potential of ski jumping is to introduce a sex-integrated individual competition for the 2016–2017 season, enabling women and men to compete against each other in the same contest. In other words, there would be no segregated classes.

The integrative competitive form can be either compensated or non-compensated. In the compensated version, women start from a higher gate than men – that is, they have a longer inrun length. The gap between the women's and the men's gate should be such that the best female and male jumpers are likely to jump as far. In attempting to achieve the desired gap, two procedures are used. Officials allocate an individual default gap to each hill. This is based on empirical evidence that has been gathered from mixed competitions. Before each round, the jury can also decide to either increase or decrease the gap based on existing wind and snow conditions.

The compensated version utilises a special qualification system to acknowledge the relative merit of jumpers of each sex. In general, a ski jumping contest includes two rounds: there are 50 jumpers in the first round, of which 30 qualify for the second round. In the compensated system, there are 25 women and 25 men in the first round. From these 50 athletes, 30 qualify for the second round. This qualification is based on absolute and relative results. The 10 best female jumpers and the 10 best male jumpers qualify according to their absolute results. For instance, if men occupy absolute positions 1st–25th and women 26th–50th in the first round, then 10 men from the 1st–10th positions qualify and 10 women from the 26th–35th positions qualify. The last 10 athletes are selected according to relative results: those 10 athletes who, in terms of percentage concerning points from the first round, have lost least to the 5th jumper of their own sex will qualify. For instance, M11 is the 11th best male jumper from the first round and receives 108 points, and M5 is the 5th best male jumper from the first round and receives 125 points; while F13 is the 13th best female jumper from the first round and receives 107 points, and F5 is the 5th best female jumper from the first round and receives 120 points. M11's points are 86% from M5's points, and F13's points are 89% from F5's points; hence, F13 qualifies for the second round before M11 does. Whether M11 qualifies for the second round at all depends on the relative performances of female jumpers F14–F20.

The non-compensated version is rather straightforward. Women and men jump against each other directly and start from the same gate. The qualification system is absolute: the best 30 athletes qualify for the second round.

The compensated version can be applied to normal hills and large hills, and the non-compensated version to ski flying hills. However, this is only a tentative suggestion based on the premise that women can jump as far as men from the same gate if they are jumping on a ski flying hill. As previously stated, this premise is only hypothetical; there is a need to gather the necessary empirical evidence to affirm or refute it. Nevertheless, we need not conduct separate and expensive tests to gather these data. One aspect of the mixed competition is to generate valuable information about the differences between women's and men's ski jumping. In other words, after the first step is taken, that is, after introducing the mixed-pair competition, we will be able to describe the second in more detail, that is, the sex-integrated competition.

Conclusion

I have argued that ski jumping possesses the untapped potential to empower women because, in this sport, women can jump as far as men, provided certain conditions exist. There are two conditions for equal jumps: Women either start from a higher gate than men, or they start from the same gate but do so on the ski flying hill. The latter condition is hypothetical and needs further evidence before it can be confirmed or refuted. To realise the empowerment potential, we should take two transformative steps. The first is to introduce a mixed-pair competition for the 2014–2015 season, and the second is to introduce a sex-integrated individual competition for the 2016–2017 season. The mixed-pair competition – with the adjustment that pair members represent the same country – could be included in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in 2018. However, this may not yet be an expedient site for the sex-integrated individual competition; we may not have gathered sufficient experience from this competition to be able to determine the suitability of PyeongChang. Nevertheless, the following Winter Olympics in 2022 might offer a fruitful opportunity.

I anticipate that my proposal will be criticised as being elitist. Ski jumping is a winter sport that is undertaken in Europe and North America: white spectators watch as white jumpers fly through the air. Additionally, jumpers are likely to come from middle-class families since ski jumping is an expensive hobby (see Travers 2011, 129). Thus, ski jumping has little, if any, impact on the black African girl whose parents cannot afford her education. I acknowledge that ski jumping may not empower *all* women; nevertheless, it can empower some. In other words, I am not advocating a gigantic leap towards

Utopia; however, sometimes, it takes small steps to build fairer societies. I leave the gigantic leaps to the heroes of this paper: female and male ski jumpers.

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Notes

1. The masculinity of ski jumping has been also challenged (see Pfister 2007, 57–59).
2. The distinction is frequently referred to in philosophy of sport literature (see Gleaves 2010, 284).
3. Records mentioned in this paper represent the situation as it exists in the year 2012.
4. Rosa Rantanen highlighted this possibility.

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