



# Willstrop

JAMES WILLSTROP EXAMINES THE CURRENT DEBATE ON EQUAL PRIZE MONEY FROM BOTH HISTORICAL AND SPORTING PERSPECTIVES, AND PRAISES THE U.S. OPEN ORGANISERS FOR THEIR STANCE ON THE ISSUE

## THE EQUALITY DEBATE

One hundred years ago Emily Davison ran onto Epsom racecourse during the Derby and was killed by the King's horse. In 1913 she was generally considered mad. It wasn't until later that she became a feminist icon who paid the ultimate price in her quest for equal rights for women. There is a BBC

documentary on the incident that is well worth watching.

Her sacrifice did not go unheeded and society in much of the world has come a long way in terms of gender equality, but the battle is not won and unfortunately within the sporting arena the scenario is disquieting. In many sports the women's version is virtually inconspicuous on the public radar.

In October the U.S. Open Squash Championships made a bold statement by dividing the prize money equally between the men and the women, something that has rarely been done in squash over the years. This attracted widespread commentary from players and fans alike and, regrettably, a number of people – even some players – seem to be unflinching on the matter, citing unfathomable, archaic and plain sexist views as explanations.

Some have made the point that every sporting

event has a value in terms of what it can attract commercially, irrespective of whether men or women compete. This is correct and will always be true. As an example, tennis has a greater commercial value

than squash. In the same way, men's squash presently brings in more revenue than women's. But the more

money and support that is invested in something, the more interest it will generate. If promoters followed the example of the U.S. Open, there is no reason why the women's game couldn't grow and thrive in the same way as the men's.

That the women are no less exceptional at what they do is clear and the U.S. Open proved this beyond doubt. The women's game is as competitive as ever and they are just as fiercely dedicated to their sport as the men, if not more. Why then should they reap less?

Some argue that women's squash is less entertaining. I have watched thousands of hours of squash in my time and sit there rapt when Nicol David plays a world championship final. She is an athlete at the height of her powers and I'm not put off because she hasn't got the innate physical power of the top men. For the people who say the women are less skilful,

what many professional men, myself included, would give to execute a volley nick the way Raneem El Welily does.

Most – but not all – sports are behind when it comes to this issue. Tennis authorities have struck the balance. It is virtually the only sport in which women stand parallel with men. It is equally gratifying that the Olympics have given female athletes such high profile. In this country we are lucky to have role models like Jessica Ennis-Hill, Kelly Holmes and Rebecca Adlington, and they prove the public demand is just as high for women's sport as it is for men. When Holmes won her two gold medals in 2004, nobody belittled the achievement by pointing out that she didn't run as fast as her male equivalents; to have done so would have been ridiculous.

The entire sporting landscape remains imbalanced in terms of women's sport. Compare the plight of women cricketers, footballers and rugby players in the UK with the men. Their corresponding leagues enjoy virtually no media profile and attract fewer sponsors, less television

and money. Flicking through a newspaper nowadays makes for depressing reading; a fleeting glance at any sports section shows that reportage is startlingly weighted in favour of men.

What is also statistically incredible is how few women ever become involved with the backroom, administrative or staffing side of men's professional sport. Has there ever been a woman coach of a professional football or rugby outfit? Seldom,

if ever, does a woman take on a role as physical trainer to a men's team and neither are there many women officials in men's matches; backward principles, indeed, if they are calculated, which they must be. Are people inadvertently saying that women are unable to coach, train or referee men as well as men do?

This is an era that supposedly balks at the gross inequality typical of the Emily Davison era only a hundred years ago. We think we have come a long way in that time, but a close examination of sporting trends indicates that those same principles and prejudices remain.

US Squash are to be congratulated for what they have done. The PSA have also been supportive, making efforts to televise the women's game sometimes at their own cost, something many won't realise.

It is important that the associations continue to endorse equality in sport and that together with the media, they keep building momentum towards a more balanced sporting landscape. No doubt Emily Davison would approve.



British Open champion Laura Massaro (left) in close combat with former England no.1 Jenny Duncalf