Italian Fascism and the female body

Sport, Submissive Women and strong mothers

Gigliola Gori

11

Sportswomen of the Fascist era: biographies and interviews

This chapter presents brief biographies of Ondina Valla and other prominent sportswomen of the Fascist era, along with excerpts from interviews with Valla and others. These interviews are not necessarily representative of former sportswomen in general, but are simply selected examples of the ways in which such women recall participating in the phenomenon of women's sport in the closing years of the Fascist era. The interviews include some oral testimonies collected in the region of Marche in central Italy. It has not been possible to collect information according to prearranged schemes because those interviewed, who were of course well on in years, preferred to talk about their experiences in 'semi-monologue' form. The questions were necessarily submitted in 'open form' and in a few cases the answers were a little vague. In general, by telling their own stories those interviewed predictably revealed a certain nostalgia for their early youth and promise, but also a sort of embarrassment in talking about a period that has been taboo in Italy ever since the fall of the regime. They recall singular realities that cannot be represented easily in conventional historical writing. These realities touch on private spheres, identities, emotions and silent memories, which would otherwise be irretrievably lost.[1]

Ondina Valla: biography

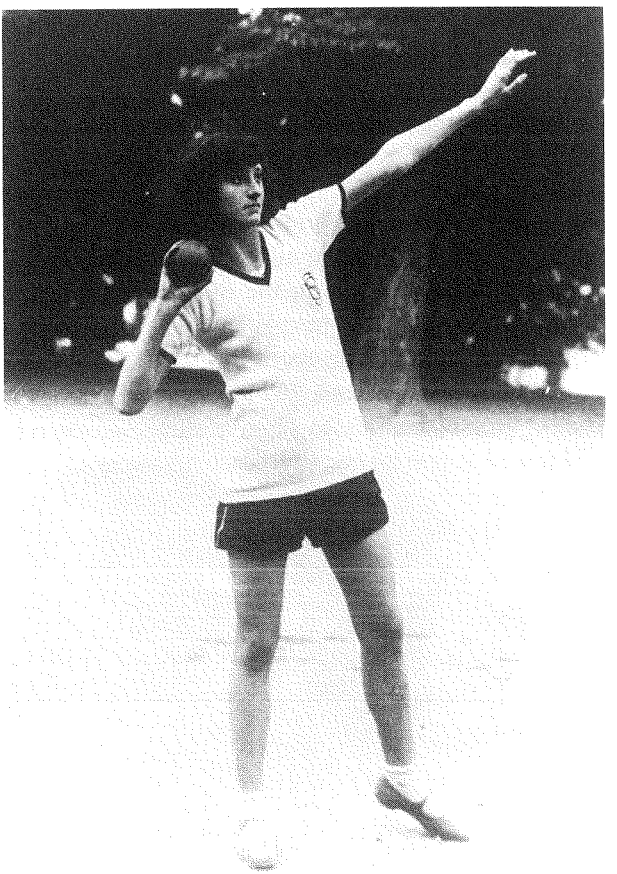
During the Fascist era the model of the prolific mother was officially imposed from on high as the most suitable symbol for the new Italian woman Despite this the athlete Trebisonda Valla, who came from a relatively poor background, made herself into a different symbol that inspired many Italian women.

Trebisonda Valla was born on 20 May 1916 in Bologna, her parents' last child after four sons.[2] Her family lived in a small village near the city, but soon moved to the centre of Bologna. Her father was a skilled blacksmith and her mother was a traditional housewife. Female seclusion was quite common at the time, due both to the typical Italian husband's jealousy and to the question of 'image'. Women did not like to go out carrying heavy loads, or show themselves in public when not perfectly dressed, especially in small villages where most women spent their spare time watching people

in the street from their windows. Shopping, washing clothes and dishes, or cleaning shoes were all considered disgraceful work even for lower middle-class women like Valla's mother. Her obedient daughter and a part-time maid helped her take care of the five men of the household.

When Valla was only three years old she was sent out shopping for the first time and in the following years she used to walk about 500 metres to primary school on her own. She was quite a dynamic and independent little girl, and enjoyed jumping across ditches and playing various games. Her strong, tall brothers enjoyed physical activities and were particularly talented at the high jump, but after leaving school they did not continue training or competing. Their sister, however, started a brilliant career in athletics that lasted until 1943.

In 1927 Valla was trained in the high jump for about one month by a male primary school teacher, a Mr Formigini, and came first in the next scholastic



11.1 Young Ondina Valla putting the shot

championships in Bologna with a jump of 1.10 metres. In 1928 she could easily jump 1.25 metres and was enrolled in the *Bologna Sportiva* association. There she met her strongest rival, Claudia Testoni, who became one of her closest friends. Valla also met a good coach who trained female athletes about three times a week.

In 1929 Valla competed in an important athletics meeting in Bologna against women from France, Britain, Poland and Czechoslovakia. She was the youngest member of the Italian team. Although she wore old gym shoes instead of boots with spikes, she came fifth in both the high jump and the long jump. She was growing tall and strong, and started practising other sporting disciplines, such as putting the shot, the 100 metre and 80 metre hurdles, basketball, fencing, swimming, and skating.

In 1930, when Valla was only 14 years old, she attracted attention during a meeting in Naples that pitted Italian athletes against visitors from Belgium. She was once again the youngest member of the Italian team, which was then being trained by Marina Zanetti (see Chapters 4 and 9). Valla did not win the 80 metre hurdles, but the specialist press was quite impressed by the young athlete. During a boating excursion taken by the team and the press a journalist observed that the name 'Trebisonda' was too long and heavy for such an adolescent, and proposed the nickname 'Ondina'. It literally means a 'small wave' and apparently referred to the easy way she overcame hurdles as if describing a wave motion.

Valla went on to become a popular athlete both in Italy and abroad. Later in 1930, having set Italian records in the 80 metre hurdles and the high jump, she was chosen to attend the next Women's World Games, in Prague. She then had to travel by train for about 36 hours, sitting in a cheap and uncomfortable second-class carriage, and put up with poor accommodation

11.2 Ondina Valla teaching hurdling

in Prague, since first-class tickets and better accommodation were reserved only for male athletes.[3] The few female athletes who competed in the name of Italy received very little financial or practical support.[4] Competitive women's sport was both criticised and undervalued, although a number of nonconformist women were obtaining good results in more than one sport (including the pilot, skier, roller-skaters and long-distance runners profiled elsewhere in this chapter). Valla herself recalled that female athletes were given good-quality sportswear only for the duration of an event and then had to give them back (an observation made by other female athletes quoted in this chapter). At the beginning of Valla's career most of her travelling expenses were paid by her father, who, perhaps surprisingly, was her staunchest supporter along with her brothers. However, her mother insisted that Valla should give up sport as soon as possible, saying that she was not a little girl anymore. Her mother preferred to have her safe at home, waiting for a good husband. Yet Valla, who really enjoyed athletics, continued to train.

Valla and the rest of the women's athletic team could not go to Los Angeles for the Olympic Games in 1932, largely because of opposition from Pope Pius XI. However, in 1933 Valla competed internationally once again, at the World University Games in Paris, for which she was give false credentials as a university student despite having given up formal education some years before. She won the 100 metres, the 80 metre hurdles and the 4 x 100m relay in Paris and a French journalist dubbed her the 'little Italian wonder'.

In 1935 Valla and other Italian athletes began preparing for the next Olympic Games. The men's and women's teams trained together and stayed in the same hotel, in spite of the Fascist and Catholic preference for separating the sexes.[5] Valla's most celebrated victory was at the Berlin Olympics in 1936, when she came first and set a world record in the 80 metre hurdles (11″ 6). The *Führer* shook hands with her, but Valla later confessed that she had not been impressed at all: Hitler was nobody in comparison with the *Duce*, Mussolini.[6] Her gold medal was the only one awarded to any of the Italian athletes, even though the male athletic team had a very good reputation, and had long been strongly supported by the Fascist regime and the press. Valla and the six other Italian women athletes sent to Berlin also came fourth in both the 80 metre hurdles and the 4 x 100 metre relay, and at last they could see their names printed in block capitals on the pages of national newspapers and specialist sports magazines.

As soon as she arrived back from Berlin at the railway station in Bologna Valla was received like a film star by local dignitaries and excited fans. She confessed that was quite a surprise, as she was not used to such a reception, which was normally given only to Italian sportsmen. Later she was congratulated by Mussolini in Rome, together with the other members of the Italian

team, and received a gold *Medaglia al Valore Atletico* (Medal for Athletic Valour) from him.[7] The success of the women's team in Berlin convinced Mussolini that a selected number of sportswomen could contribute to spreading the image of Fascist sportspeople all over the world. From then on the regime's propaganda machine worked strenuously in favour of the enrolment of girls and young women in its youth organisations. Valla, meanwhile had a special audience with Pius XI, who shook hands with her and congratulated her. The Olympic victory had suddenly opened a breach in the 'masculinist' wall erected against women's emancipation by the highest authorities in Italy, the *Duce* and the Pope.

Hundreds of letters, flowers, suitors, invitations, interviews and photographs, and even an offer of a job as a film star, changed Valla's life. Italy's first female Olympic gold medallist gained prestige, money, a good job in Bologna and a wealthy physician as her husband. Her achievement in Berlin, and her national records in the high jump (five times), the long jump, the pentathlon, the 100 metres (twice) and the 80 metre hurdles (six times), made her a heroine for many young women and contributed a little to undermining the female inferiority complex, with its deep roots both in the paternalistic tradition of the past and in the new Fascist ideology. Valla herself told the Italian press agency that she dedicated her victory in Berlin both to the Fatherland and to the achievements of Italian women's sport.

Famous Italian sportswomen of the time were still depicted by the press as examples of modesty, femininity and daughterly love, if only to reassure traditionalists and parents. Thus Angela Cressi was celebrated for being twice *Littoriali* female champion in the javelin and twice a mother, while one journalist ended an article on Valla with the lines: 'And Ondina Valla, Olympic champion, now runs off, as it is 7:45 p.m. In spite of any victory, Father Valla does not allow her to be out after 8 o'clock!'[8] However, it was also rumoured that Valla was sexually interested in women.[9] When she became a mother the news was emphasised as a demonstration that sporting competition, femininity and maternity were compatible after all. Like other famous athletes who became mothers, such as Cressi, Bruna Pizzini-Brianza, Ninì Bordoni-Ray and, especially, Vittorina Vivenza, who was the happy mother of nine children, Valla was interviewed and photographed with her child to stop the gossip about her sexual proclivities.

Since Valla had, as we have seen, given up schoolwork without graduating from senior high school, she was unable either to attend the *Accademia Nazionale Femminile di Educazione Fisica* in Orvieto, or to become a teacher or official in any of the Fascist youth organisations. Instead the regime gave her a job as a secretary in the party headquarters (*Casa del Fascio*) in Bologna, where she was paid more than other employees (about 500 lire a month instead of 350 lire). However, she did not enjoy sitting for long periods typing out membership cards and after a lot of complaints she

was allowed to focus on her physical training while retaining her nominal post and her special salary.

Ondina Valla: interview

On 8 May 1994 I went to Aquila to interview Ondina Valla at her home. It was a pleasure to spend a couple of hours with Valla. She was then 78 years old and had some problems with her legs, but she was still vivacious. Unfortunately, she no longer had a good memory, and sometimes forgot or confused names and data. She had not preserved much of her past, just some photographs and cuttings, and she said that her Olympic gold medal had been stolen. She did not like to speak about her belief or involvement in Fascism, but simply declared that she agreed with Mussolini – like, she claimed, most Italians between the wars – and had been honoured by the regime for her sporting achievements alone. From her omissions rather than from her words one could deduce that when the regime exploited her image and achievements it did so with her consent.

Ondina, when did you start doing physical activities?
I was 11 years old when I was recruited in Bologna by Captain Costa, who came to my primary school looking for children who were naturally talented in athletics. I was tested together with some other pupils, but was unsuccessful in the high jump. Even so, he noticed me because I was thin and agile. He asked my name and when I answered 'Valla' he said: 'Valla? Are you a sister of the two famous running and jumping Valla brothers?' My positive reply gave me the opportunity to be trained, together with a small number of other little girls, by the male teacher of the boys. This person, Mr Grimolizi, taught us to run and jump in the courtyard of the school, during the daily break.

What were the next steps you took?
Well, at school we took part in gymnastics displays and competed against other schools in Bologna, but I did not like gymnastics as much as athletics. Leandro Arpinati, then the secretary of the party, was from Bologna and, being keen on sport, he encouraged this activity among his fellow citizens. Students of both sexes were sent by bus and trained at the Littoriale Stadium.

When I became a member of the *Bologna Sportiva* sports association, which later became affiliated to the *Virtus Bologna* society, I had a good trainer from Hungary, Mr Gaspar. He used to train girls in athletic disciplines about two or three times a week, but only in the good season. Sometimes we were trained and competed on Sunday evenings, just after the football match, and crowds of football spectators came to see us as well.

When I was only 14 I was sent to Florence for the national championship. There I won both the high jump and the 80 metre hurdles against older and

stronger competitors. I remember that after these victories the athletes Polacco and Martino from Trieste, and another from Venice, gave up competing.

Can you tell us the story of the nickname Ondina?
There are several stories about it, but in truth this name derives from a mistake by a journalist, who wrote 'Trebi*t*onda' instead of 'Trebisonda'. From this mistaken 'Trebi*t*onda' somebody started to call me by the nickname 'Trebi*t*ondina', and then simply 'Ondina'. From then onwards this became my name, but my parents started to call me Ondina much later, after the Berlin Olympics.

How were you able to participate in the Olympic Games in 1936?
When I was included in the national women's athletic team for the Olympics I had already set some national records and participated in international contests. That spring the team went for training to Rapallo, where the weather was warmer and more agreeable. We left Italy and arrived in Berlin one month in advance, in order to get accustomed to the different track and climate. Our trainer was Boyd Comstock from America, the official trainer of the Italian athletes. In Berlin, all the sportswomen lived in the 'Women's House', and we spent our spare time visiting the city and its fantastic shops.

Could you say something about your victorious race in Berlin?
In the semi-final of the 80 metre hurdles I was not only the winner but my time equalled the world record, so I thought I could probably win the final. On that day I had run twice in about one hour, and my right leg was painful and heavy, but on the following day the final of the 80 metre hurdles had to be run anyway. As a matter of fact, in the final my start was really slow, but after the first two hurdles I had caught up with the rest of the runners. Four of us were so close together at the wire that only a photo could sort us out and determine that I was the winner. We had to wait about half an hour for the result and two hours for the prize-giving ceremony, where only two athletes, the German and me, went up onto the podium. Unfortunately, the third, a Canadian, thinking she had only come fourth, had already left the stadium.

The prize-giving was fantastic. Among the spectators there were Princess Jolanda of Savoy and Mussolini's son. The organisers presented me with a little oak plant and wreath, while the music of the Italian royal march and the Fascist hymn *Giovinezza* (Youth) was spreading all over the very crowded stadium. And I was standing stiff in the Fascist salute!

How did you feel then, and what happened later?
At that very moment I felt an amazing sensation, as if this victory did not involve me at all. Later I was greeted by my friends in the Women's House, where maids of honour and a bottle of champagne awaited me. When I got

home my father and my brothers, together with both important and ordinary people, welcomed me. The Prefect of Bologna in person congratulated me and presented me with a bouquet of flowers, and people sent me a bagful of telegrams. During the days that followed I was told that I had to go to the railway station, where a parcel sent from Rome by the royal family was waiting for me. I was really excited trying to guess what wonderful thing might be in it, but when I opened the parcel I found just a silver frame and a photograph signed by Queen Helen. I was still young – only 20 years old at that time – and my imagination was so vivid! I delivered the little oak plant to the authorities in Bologna, who ordered it to be planted in the nearby stadium and to add a plaque with my name. Some time later somebody, I presume an anti-Fascist, tried to cut down the plant, without success, but he broke the plaque in two and it had to be joined together again.

All the athletes who had won medals at the Berlin Olympics were received by Mussolini. I was the one and only woman in the group. Everyone was trying to approach Mussolini, but the *Duce* said: 'I want Miss Valla near me!' In Rome there was also a ceremony in the *Stadio dei Marmi*, where a diploma and a medal were given to each member of the group.

Did you receive any reward for your sporting activity?
In the whole of my life I never got any money from the Italian sporting organisations, apart from 5,000 lire that I received for the Olympic victory [about half the annual salary of a high school teacher]. In addition, in Berlin the Italians received 20 lire a day. With this sum I bought a little mechanical doll for myself and a coat for my father. When I took part in national or international competitions the organisers paid only the out-of-pocket expenses, but petty expenses were paid by my father. I remember that he gave me 50 lire for national competitions and 100 lire for journeys abroad. Sometimes we also received little gifts and gadgets, collected from the shops in the host town.

Did you practise any other sport?
I enjoyed skiing, and this activity had made my arms so strong that I could compete in the classical pentathlon as well. I learned to throw the javelin and put the shot, and also won a national championship and the Italian record in this discipline. By the end of the 1930s I was ready for the Olympic Games [due to take place] in Tokyo [in 1940], but the coming of war destroyed my dreams. After the birth of my son Luigi I was still fit and I was planning to participate in the London Olympics in 1948, but I had to give up because of a number of physical problems.

Was there any disagreement over female sport?
Generally I had no problems, but once in Bologna a spectator was rude about me. I did not hear what he said, but my brother immediately struck him with

his fist and knocked him to the floor. Often my sporting society was invited to bilateral meetings in other Italian cities or abroad, and I was the only woman of the team. Of course, women had to be more careful, and dress in long shorts!

What about the Church?
After Berlin I even went to St Peter's and was received by Pope Pio XII [sic], who said: 'Well done, our compliments!' But let me remember ... Yes, the Pope was against female athleticism, because he thought that it was dangerous to women's health. In fact, in 1934 a newspaper referred to 'the dying swan of female athletics'!

Some other prominent sportswomen

Italian women involved in high-level sporting competitions were an exception during the Fascist era and offered a model of femininity that stood in contrast to the official one until very late in the regime's history (see Chapter 10). Nevertheless their presence on the national and international sporting scene was not simply tolerated but actively supported by the regime.[10]

Claudia Testoni, runner

Claudia Testoni was both Valla's closest friend and her most serious rival in athletics. They both spent most of their early years in Bologna, where Testoni was born on 19 December 1915, and were both all-round athletes. They then became involved in the same sporting adventures in Italy and abroad, travelling together, living in the same hotels and largely sharing the same emotions. Like Valla, Testoni was included in the women's athletic teams that participated in the Women's World Games in Prague in 1930 and the Berlin Olympics in 1936, but in Germany fate went against her. After the semi-final of the 80 metre hurdles she was placed fourth and therefore did not qualify, until it was discovered from the photographs that she had come third. The next day she ran in the final and apparently came second, only to be told about half an hour later that she had only come fourth. From then onwards Valla was first and Testoni second in the feelings of their fans, although both were extraordinary athletes. Testoni took her revenge in 1938, when she became European champion in the 80 metre hurdles and equalled Valla's world record (11″ 6). In addition she set the world record twice at international meetings in Milan (11″ 5) and Garmisch-Partenkirchen (11″ 3).

Testoni's brilliant career started at the beginning of the 1930s and ended at the beginning of the 1940s, in parallel with Valla's. Testoni set national records three times in the 100 metres (her best time was 12″), four times in

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SPORT IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY

DID THE FASCIST REGIME PROMOTE A LIBERATING PHYSICAL CULTURE FOR ITALIAN WOMEN?

This is the first text to examine the effect of the Fascist regime on women and sport in Italy. In seeking to quantify and qualify the impact of Fascism, Gori begins by examining female physical culture in the pre-Fascist period. She goes on to explore the limitations placed on developments in women's cultural and sporting lives during the Fascist era, when behaviour was governed by a strict framework designed by medicine and eugenics, religious and traditional education.

Italy aspired to emancipation, as promised by the Fascist revolution but the region's social, cultural and religious traditions, governed by a masculine hegemony, made the cause of female emancipation extremely difficult to advance. Gori demonstrates that the engagement of women in some sporting activities during the Fascist era did promote and support some gender emancipation, but in the post-war period, Italian women's sport continued to struggle in comparison to other European regions.

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