

Women athletes in the Olympic Games

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the evolution of female participation in the modern Olympic Games. The investigation is based on a descriptive mode with documental analysis, crossing various sources and bibliography, such as reports and factsheets from the International Olympic Committee and publications of various authors. The results show an evolution that has been observed since the beginning of the 20th century. Since no women participated in the first edition of the Olympic Games, we can now say that gender and opportunity equality was only achieved in the beginning of the 21st century. **Keywords:** Olympic Games; Women; Gender; Equality; Sports.

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INTRODUCTION

The ancient Olympic Games, held between 776 BC and 393 AC, were a religious sports festival carried out every four years, in Olympia, in honour of Zeus. They were the most important Pan-Hellenic games, having been forbidden by the emperor Theodosius I, who considered the games a pagan cult. Only men and boys were allowed to participate in this sports event.

Pierre de Frédi (1863-1937), also known for his noble title as the *Baron de Coubertin*, or even by the junction of both, *Pierre de Coubertin*, is considered the founder of the modern Olympic Games. This young Frenchman, who believed in a life philosophy based on the harmony of body, will and mind, uniting sports, culture and education, aimed at reviving the ancient Olympic Games. It was under this goal that *Coubertin* organised an International Congress in 1894 at the *University of Sorbonne*, in Paris, where he presented his proposal to revive the Olympic Games. His decision to do so was taken on the 23rd of June 1884. It was unanimously agreed that the first modern Olympic Games should be held in Olympia Greece, two years later.

Since then, the Olympic Games started to be organised every four years (1916, 1940 and 1944 editions were not organized due to the First and the Second World Wars), and ever since the first edition there has been an increase in the number of athletes, coaches, judges, officials and National Olympic Committees, reflecting the tendencies for an ongoing globalisation process.

However, when *Pierre de Coubertin* idealised to reorganize the ancient Games, he did not do so while envisioning an equal participation from men and women. His position regarding this matter is well known, the games should be exclusively for men. Coubertin's initial position regarding the participation of women in the Games started to change in the second edition of the modern Olympic Games, held in Paris, in 1900. Since then, female participation has been growing with the objective of achieving the much-desired gender equality. This gender equality happens for the first time, in the Olympic history, on the 3rd edition of the Olympic Youth Games held in Buenos Aires, in October 2018.

Gender equality became a strategic question for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in the last decade of the 20th century, leading to the publication of several reports and orientations to be implemented on a national level.

Examples of those are the updates of the 18th of July 1996, made in the Olympic Charter that began to introduce the promotion of female sports and gender equality: "to strongly encourage, by appropriate means, the promotion of women in sports at all levels and all structures, especially on the executive bodies of national and international sports organisations, as to apply a strict principle of equality among men and women" (Olympic Charter, 1996).

Further on, in a document published on the 7th of July 2007, the text was amended, and to this day it states: "to encourage and support the promotion of women in sports at all levels and in all structures, as to implement the principle of equality among men and women" (Olympic Charter, 1996). As a follow-up, on the 127th session of the IOC held in Monaco on the 7th of December 2014, 40 recommendations to be implemented until 2020 were defined, and published in the 2020 Olympic Agenda. The recommendation number 11 refers to the promotion of gender equality, to which IOC proposes the following to: "work with the International Federations to achieve 50% of female participation in the Olympic Games and stimulate the participation of women and their involvement in sports, thus creating more opportunities for them to participate in the Olympic Games" (Olympic Charter, 1996).

This article analyses the participation of female athletes in the Olympic Games, using an ample analysis framework, in the context of female social empowerment from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

METHOD

The article is based on documental analysis based on the identification, selection and interpretation of primary sources and bibliography, namely official documents published by the International Olympic Committee. In order to map, in a general sense, the participation of female athletes in the Olympic Games, quantitative data of the official statistics published by the IOC was also collected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A century of opportunities

With the revival of the modern Olympic Games, women, similarly as to what had happened in the ancient Games, were not allowed to participate. There was however the case of a Greek athlete, *Melpomema*, who wanted to participate in the marathon during the 1896 Athens Olympic Games but she was banned by the organisation.

This question was however changed in the following edition of the Games. In the early 20th century women had very few opportunities outside the household and family sphere. The number of women that dedicated themselves to practicing sports was very small. It was said that women ought to be fragile, modest and reluctant to exert themselves. Those who did practice sports should not compete, and their clothing was limited to what was socially accepted at the time, there were no exceptions.

Women mostly practiced elegant sports, some even nicknamed “*ladylike*” such as: tennis, croquet, cycling, ice skating or golf. Aristocratic women also dedicated some of their time to equestrian sports and sailing. The practice of physically demanding sports such as hockey, cricket, swimming or athletics was not socially accepted. In an interview to the Portuguese weekly newspaper *Expresso*, a Portuguese athlete, *Helena Villalva*, who had been selected to the female gymnastics team in the 1952 Olympic Games, recalls that “(...) female gym teachers taught sitting at a desk, wearing a coat and foot warmers” (*Expresso*, 13th August 2016).

Many of the sports we know today started appearing around this time. Team-based sports were mostly directed at men, with women dedicating themselves to individual sports, sacrificing competitiveness for elegance. With time, they also started participating in gymnastics exhibitions and swimming, gradually women practicing sports started to become socially accepted.

Slowly, they also stopped wearing corsets, so they could wear shorter skirts and began wearing their hair loose and shorter. Technological development and the end of the First World War also caused a mindset shift and women started leaving their households, replacing men in factories, offices and workshops. The rhythm of the *Belle Epoque* was left behind as the world entered the “Roaring Twenties”.

Women Athletes in the Olympic Games

The first female participation in the Olympics happened in the 1900 Paris Games. They were held during the World Fair and the competitions were spread across five months, between the 14th of May and the 28th of October. Out of 997 athletes, only 22 women competed in two disciplines: tennis and golf.

The British athlete *Charlotte Cooper* (1870-1966) won the female Olympic Tennis Tournament, becoming the first female Olympic Champion in history. She also added to this feat the victory in mixed doubles, and the North American *Margaret Ives Abbot* (1878-1955), was the champion of the female Golf Tournament, consisting of nine holes. Considering that the events took place in different venues, and that the Olympics were the Programme of the World Fair, and even though she was not officially part of the North American delegation, she signed up for the tournament and won. Later on, it was known that Margaret Abbot was never made aware that she had been the first female Olympic Champion of the United States of America (Leder, 1996: 13).

A new chapter had begun with the consecration of the first female Olympic Champions. Four years later, the Olympics were held in the North American city of St. Louis and the only competition opened to women was archery. The Games were again part of the World Fair and as such they lasted four and a half months. 651 athletes competed from the 1st of July to the 23rd of November. Only six of them were women, and all of them were North American. The great champion was *Lida Howell* (1859-1939), who conquered three Olympic Champion titles, two of them individual and one in a team. This edition of the Olympic Games had, for the first time, three different types of medals to be awarded to the top three competitors: gold, silver and bronze.

The 1908 Olympic Games, which were initially planned to be held in Rome, Italy, were held in London instead due to the volcanic eruption of *Mount Vesuvius* in 1906. Those Games had the longest duration so far, spanning across six months and four days, from the 27th of April to the 31st of October. There were 2 008 competing athletes, 37 of which were women who participated in archery, tennis and ice skating, a winter sport that first appeared in the Games 16 years before the first winter edition, which only happened in 1924, in Chamonix, France.

Four years later, the number of participants grew yet again. Of a total of 2 407 athletes, 48 were women competing in aquatic sports (swimming and diving) and in female and mixed doubles tennis competitions. For the first time, athletes from all five continents were present, but it was also known for including art competitions: literature, sculpture, painting, architecture and music. Curiously the author who won the literary prize was *Pierre de Coubertin* under the pseudonym of *Georges Hohrod*.

The 1916 Olympic Games were the first Games in history to be cancelled since the revival of the modern Olympic Movement. The outbreak of the First World War and the conflicts on French soil had already forced the International Olympic Committee to relocate to Switzerland in 1915, a neutral country, where it has remained since.

During the post-war years, countries started to slowly recover from the economic and social impact caused by the First World War, but the interwar years, organisation and progress are felt overall. It is also a time of change for women, which is inevitably felt both in sports and in the Olympic Games.

More women participated in the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games. Out of 2 626 athletes, 63 were female, and this number duplicated four years later. In the 1924 Paris Games, out of 3 089 athletes, 135 were women, who have also started to participate in fencing competitions. Later on, in Amsterdam, women started to participate in athletics and gymnastics. The number of participating women naturally rose up to 277 women out of 2 883 athletes.

The Olympic Games returned to North America with some innovations, such as the first Olympic Villages. However, these were only available for male athletes, as the organisation claimed they had no logistical

conditions to also accommodate women. The participation in the tenth edition of the Games, in Los Angeles, 1932, was greatly reduced: only 1 206 men and 126 women competed for the much-wanted medals across the 16 days that the competition lasted.

The following edition of the Games made history for very different reasons, namely political ones. During the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games participation rates increased. Women started to compete in ski, another sport which would later on become part of the Winter Games programme. Out of 3963 athletes competing 331 were women.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the 1940 and 1944 Olympic Games were cancelled. Since a great percentage of the male population had been mobilised for military service, women were called in to replace men in day-to-day tasks.

After a 12-year hiatus, the world naturally changed, and that change would reflect itself in the next editions of the Olympic Games. Women slowly began to conquer more space and prominence in sporting venues and society began accepting them.

From the 1948 London Olympic Games to the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, women slowly earn their own place in the Olympic Program, increasing their participation in number and in sports. They started to compete in canoeing, equestrian sports and for the first time in a team sport: volleyball.

In 1956, on the 7th edition of the Winter Olympic Games held in Cortina D'Ampezo, Italy, the Olympic Oath was taken by a woman for the first time, the Italian skier *Giuliana Chenal-Minuzzo (1931 - ...)*. She, who four years before, had won a bronze medal in the 1952 Oslo Winter Olympic Games, in the downhill competition and eight years later, in the 1960 Squaw Valley Winter Games, would win another bronze medal, this time in the giant slalom competition.

In the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games, the Mexican athlete *Enriqueta Basilio (1948 - ...)* that competed in 800 meters hurdles also made history by being the first woman to light the Olympic Cauldron (in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games a tower to light a flame was included for the first time, which became a trademark of all Games) and four years later, in the 1972 Munich Games, which were marked by an appalling terrorist attack (eleven athletes belonging to the Israel team were made hostage by the Palestinian group Black September. The negotiations between the group and the local police were unsuccessful and all hostages were killed.), also registered new participation records: the total number of athletes was over 7 000 and the women competing over 1 000 (IOC Factsheet, 2013).

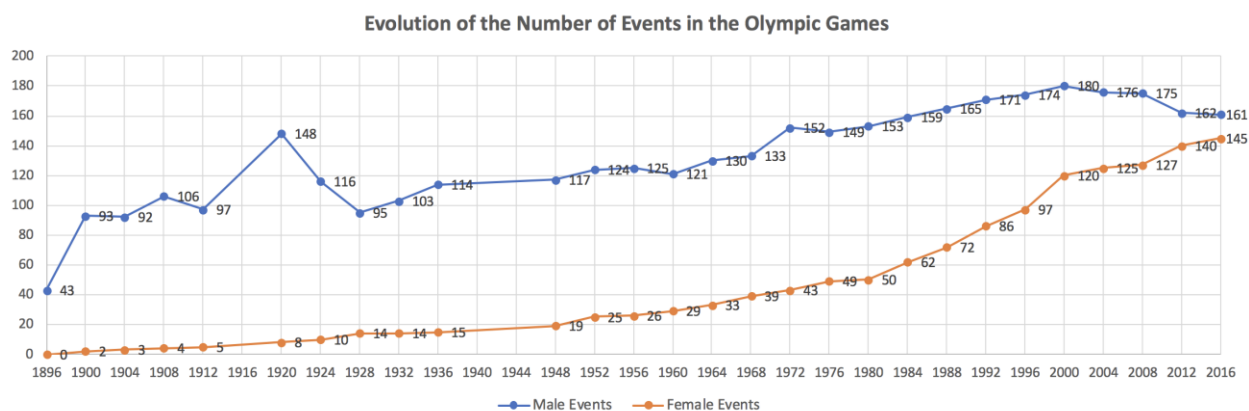
In 1991, the IOC defined that to be included in the Olympic Programme sports have to include women.

Until the end of the 20th century, women kept showing their ability to assert themselves in diverse areas of society. Some examples are *Margaret Thatcher* becoming prime-minister of Great Britain, *Sandra Day O'Connor* becoming the first woman in the Supreme Court of the United States of America and *Valentina Tereshkova* becoming the first female astronaut and the first woman to go to space.

In the Games, women started being allowed to compete in rowing, basketball, handball, hockey, shooting, cycling, table tennis, sailing, badminton, judo, football and softball. In the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, there were 3 512 women athletes in the first Games to reach 10 318 athletes.

With the beginning of the 21st century, women’s struggle for equality continued, inside and outside of sports. In the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, which marked a hundred years since women started their participation, the relay of the Olympic Flame in the Stadium during the opening ceremony was done exclusively by women, all of them Australian athletes. *Cathy Freeman (1973 - ...)*, the first Aboriginal athlete to represent Australia, had the honour of lit the Olympic Cauldron in the opening ceremony, in a clear sign of integration of ethnical minorities in the biggest multisport event in the world. Women were then present in even more sport disciplines: weightlifting, modern pentathlon, taekwondo, triathlon, wrestling, boxing and rugby.

Equal participation for women in the Olympics took a century to be achieved, this happened for the first time in the 2012 London Olympic Games, where for the first time women were allowed to compete in boxing. However although women participated in all sports included in the Olympic Programme, the number of events was still slightly under parity, at 47,4%, with 16 more competitions for men.



Source: Made by the author with data collected from: IOC Factsheet – The Games of the Olympiad, 28 October 2013 & IOC Factsheet – Women in the Olympic Movement, 7 February 2018

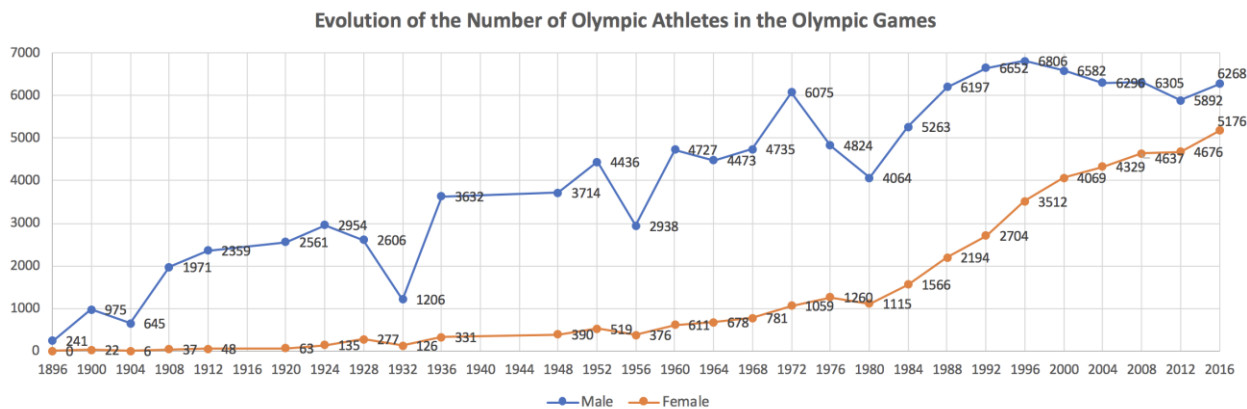
Figure 1. Evolution of the Number of Events in the Olympic Games – Male and Female (1896 – 2016)

One hundred and sixteen years after the first edition of the modern Olympic Games, in which only men were allowed, the 2012 London Games made history by being the first Games in which all delegations included female athletes.

The percentage of countries that included female athletes grew from 2% in Paris (1900), reached 45% in the Olympic Games of Antwerp (1920), 54% in Amsterdam (1928), 70% in Montreal (1976), 85% in Atlanta (1996), 96% in Beijing (2008) and finally reached 100% in the London Olympic Games (2012).

As to the number of athletes participating in the Olympic Games, the 31st edition of the Games, held in the Brazilian city Rio de Janeiro, in 2016, registered a new participation record with 5 176 women out of 11 444 athletes.

The percentage of women is not yet equal, albeit by a small margin. Between 1900 and 1920, the percentage of women amongst the total athletes of the Games was between 1% and 2%. The numbers began increasing in Antwerp (1920) when the percentage hit 10%, and in Montreal (1976) it got to 21%. In the Atlanta Games (1996) 34% of all athletes were women and in Beijing (2008), 42%. In the last two editions (2012 and 2016), the percentages were 44% and 45%, respectively.



Source: Made by the author with data collected from: IOC Factsheet – The Games of the Olympiad, 28 October 2013 & IOC Factsheet – Women in the Olympic Movement, 7 February 2018

Figure 2. Evolution of the Number of Olympic Athletes in the Olympic Games – Male and Female (1896 – 2016)

For Tokyo 2020 the International Olympic Committee aims to bring these figures closer together, foreseeing a participation ratio of 48,8% with five new sports to be included in the Olympic Programme – baseball/softball, climbing, karate and surf, which will have male, female and mixed competitions.

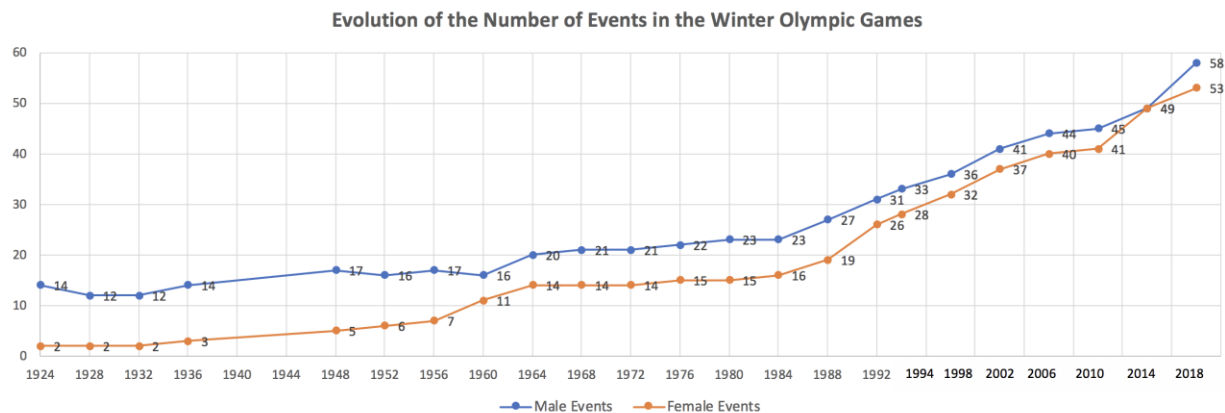
By confirming this purpose, the goals defined by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in their strategic document – Olympic Agenda 2020, one of which was to achieve an equal participation among men and women in the Olympic Games, are very close to being achieved.

The Winter Olympic Games

Since their revival, summer and winter sports were not distinguished in the Olympic Programme, and as such you could find some winter sports such as ice skating and ski in the Programme of the so called “Summer Olympics”. The International Winter Sports Week held in the French city of Chamonix, in 1924, was two years later recognised by the IOC as the first edition of the Olympic Winter Games. In this first edition, both summer and winter Olympic Games were assigned to the same organising country. Until the 1936 Olympic Games they were even held in the same year, in 1936 Germany held the summer edition in Berlin and the winter edition in Partenkirchen.

After an interruption due to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the Games started being assigned to different countries, but they were still organized in the same year. After 1986, the IOC decided to intersperse the summer and winter editions, always held in even years. As such, the 1992 Albertville Games were succeeded by the 1994 Lillehammer Games. Since then, they continue to follow a four-year cycle.

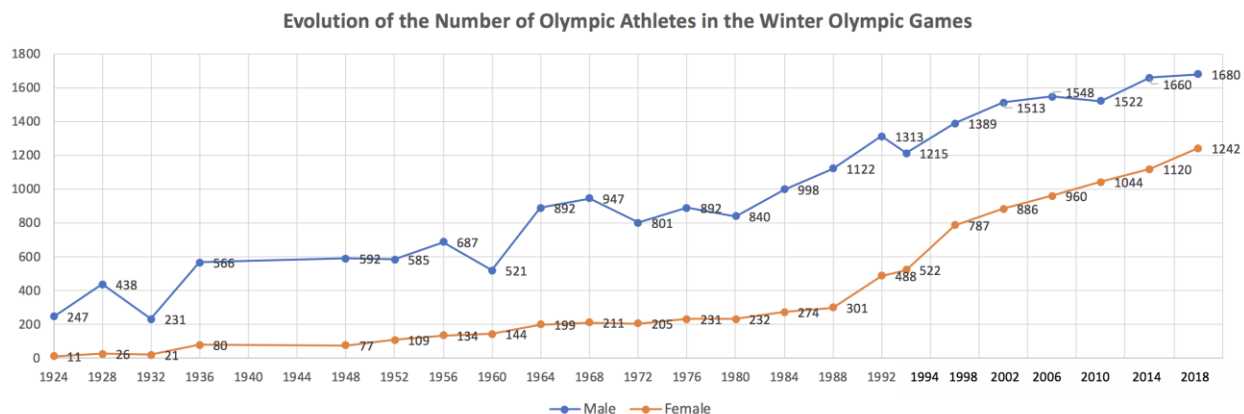
Gender equality in the events in the Programme of the Winter Olympic Games was achieved only in the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games, where men and women competed for the same number of medals. In 2018 there was a new imbalance with 49 competitions for men, 44 for women, and 9 in mixed teams.



Source: Made by the author with data collected from: IOC Factsheet – The Olympic Winter Games, September 2014 & <https://www.pyeongchang2018.com>

Figure 3. Evolution of the Number of Events in the Winter Olympic Games – Male and Female (1924 – 2018)

Women have been participating in the Winter Olympic Games since their first edition with a ratio of 4,3%, which has been growing up to the last Games, in 2018, in the South Korean town of PyeongChang, with a percentage of 42,5%.



Source: Made by the author with data collected from: IOC Factsheet – The Olympic Winter Games, September 2014 & <https://www.pyeongchang2018.com>

Figure 4. Evolution of the Number of Olympic Athletes in the Winter Olympic Games – Male and Female (1924 – 2018)

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, the Olympic Games are an extremely powerful platform to convey the most varied messages. In a society that strives for gender and opportunity equality, so too have the Olympic Games played a role in those matters. The scale of the media coverage has successively established new audience records (the first Games to be broadcast were the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, but only on national territory. The first international broadcast was of the 1956 Cortina D’Ampezzo Winter Olympic Games, in Italy), as it is estimated that half of the world population watched the last edition of the Olympic Summer Games – Rio 2016.

This essay confirms that female Olympic athletes have been true ambassadors of the changes that happen in society, not only from a point of view of practicing and excelling at sports but also in the roles of women in our contemporary society. They became stronger, more muscular, training hard under the same conditions as men so they could achieve their goals and glory. Many times, they have dual careers, balancing studies with sports, or the role of wife and mother in their families. Many women have helped break barriers regarding racial, sexual orientation, cultural and religious issues all over the world, winning not only medals and glory but also the hearts of many admirers.

Their yearning for respect as athletes and their full participation in the Olympic Programme it is almost achieved. The Olympic women of the 20th century who frequently faced the social and cultural traditions and conventions that discouraged, and sometimes even prohibited, their participation in the Olympic Games forged a path that allowed female athletes of the 21st century to compete under fully equal rights in the Olympic Games.

Sport has increasingly become a more important and more visible way of changing the roles of women and documenting their progress in the world. Since their first participation in the 1900 Olympic Games up till now, female Olympic Athletes have been attracting the attention of the world with their strength, determination and beauty. It is expected that in the next editions of the Games the percentage of men and women will be the same, much like in the 3rd edition of the Youth Olympic Games, held in Buenos Aires, from the 6 to 18 October 2018, thus achieving the 50% target set by the 2020 Agenda.

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