

Femininity Control at the Olympic Games

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Introduction

Prior to the opening of the 1976 Olympic Games in Montréal, Canada, Dr. H. Howard of the Fédération Internationale Sociétés d’Aviron (FISA) Medical Commission wrote to each affiliated national rowing federation and informed them that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) required all female athletes to undergo gender verification testing during the Games:

The Femininity control of all the competitors participating in the women’s sporting events in the 1976 Olympic Games shall be carried out in accordance with the decisions and instructions of the Medical Commission of the International Olympic Committee. The result of this examination will not be made public out of deference to the human rights of the individual. Competitors who have been registered as females must report to the femininity control head office as soon as possible after arrival (FISA, “To the Affiliated Federations”

In order to avoid the possible embarrassment of a positive test result, “Dr. Howard urged national [rowing] federations to make sure that athletes took this test before leaving for Montreal” (FISA, “Annual Congress 1975”).

At a time when questions arose about the legitimacy of female competitive international athletes, the international sport community had taken action. Sport administrators implemented measures intended to prevent any man from masquerading as a woman in order to gain an unfair gender-related advantage in women-only sports events. While the IOC and the International Sport Federations (IFs) had placed restrictions on women’s competitive sport in order to preserve femininity during the early twentieth century, the increased importance of women’s sporting success had resulted in numerous elite female athletes developing traditionally perceived masculine physical characteristics. Broad shoulders, strong muscles, and a desire to win were naturally associated with male athleticism and when women displayed these masculine

characteristics, some began to question the validity of these female athletes' gender.

The introduction of gender verification by the IOC at the 1968 Winter and Summer Olympic Games was publicly proclaimed to ensure that all female Olympic competitors faced equal competition. Yet what ensued was thirty-one years of embarrassment, harassment, and in some instances, public humiliation. Throughout its tenure in the Olympic Movement, the gender verification of female athletes had been criticized by geneticists, endocrinologists, and others in the medical community (Bakogorge). They argued that gender verification was an invalid screening test, that there was a misunderstanding of intersex, and that this singled out women based only on laboratory results (FISA, 1972). When this test was removed from the Olympic Games in 1999, the international sport community had not proven that any man had ever robbed a woman of Olympic glory. Yet what the use of this test had proven was that sport was a venue that reinforced the division between the sexes and if female athletes blurred those lines, they were not 'true' women.

Heterosexual Feminine Athletes

Sport has long been considered an ideal domain for the display of muscular masculinity. Victorian notions of female frailty deemed women unfit for any kind of physical exertion as women were considered incapable of enduring the pain of harsh, vigorous competition. These assumptions were supported by medical and scientific discourse that "confirmed the pathology of female biology and legitimated women's subjugation" (King, 31). Physicians and scientists prescribed "what activities women should engage in, what clothes they should wear to preserve appropriate 'womanliness' " (King, 31). Sport participation, especially at the international level, was considered a contraindication to women's femininity.

Physical activity for young girls and women was prescribed to promote elegance and grace. At the turn of the twentieth century, medical practitioners promoted healthy exercise that helped women to develop the essential strength and endurance that was required to be a wife and a mother. Women were encouraged to walk briskly, ride bicycles, and take part in other activities that were considered appropriate for the delicate feminine physique. The 'weaker sex' was vehemently discouraged from over-exerting themselves lest they become exhausted and damage their reproductive organs, or develop unfeminine muscles and ruin their appearance (FISA, 1938).

There was the common perception that athleticism and femininity were incompatible, and as such, women were deterred from participating in aggressive or masculine sports (Krane, 115). Sport possessed the potential to masculinize female participants, thus rendering them unattractive to the opposite sex. Bordo has suggested that muscles symbolize strength and masculinity and are directly associated with men and are not considered feminine (Unbearable Weight). Thus, those who developed muscles and strength faced the risk of defeminization and ultimately masculinization. This concern over the defeminization of female athletes led some to 'prove' that these strong, young female athletes in fact retained their femininity despite their sport participation:

These women were portrayed as having a consuming interest in the clothes, grooming and hairstyles that heterosexual attractiveness required. These women were not "shy or diffident," nor were they "rough or repellent"; rather, their behaviour was "sweet and ladylike" (Lenskyj, Out of Bounds, 75).

The concern regarding feminine-appropriate sport participation has always existed. Heterosexist attitudes and practices have classified sports as feminine and masculine and as such have rendered certain sports as appropriate for women's participation; the "rules of male-dominated sports systems have long excluded women from certain sports and dictated the quality and degree of all female sporting involvement" (Lenskyj, Out of Bounds, 57). Perceived feminine-appropriate sports enhance and display grace and femininity, while masculine-appropriate sports involve aggression, dominance, and often violence. Jennifer Hargreaves has argued that:

Sports have been classified as 'masculine-' and 'feminine-appropriate' because of fiercely defended heterosexist traditions. Conventional femininity does not incorporate images of physical power and muscularity (Sporting Females, 171).

In addition to the concern that competitive sport could masculinize female athletes, there were fears that these women might in fact begin to prefer women rather than men. Hargreaves has explained that "the construction of heterosexual femininity is a powerful form of control" (Sporting Females, 169). Women are expected to play traditional female sports and when they play traditional male sports, they risk being called " 'pseudo-men',

'unfeminine', 'gay', 'masculine', 'mannish', 'butch', 'dykes', or 'lesbians'" (Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 171).

While concerns over the masculinization of competitive female athletes have raged for decades, the debate grew even more intense during the Cold War. Women's sport participation in Eastern European nations was arguably more progressive than in Western nations (Guttmann, *Women's Sports*, 155). In Eastern Bloc countries, sport was seen as a catalyst for social change, headed by the state political leaders. James Riordan and Hart Cantelon have argued that Soviet nations emphasized the importance of physical activity as a vital component for human and cultural development ("The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe," 89).

Women played a significant role in establishing Eastern Bloc nations as the world's strongest sporting powerhouse (Peppard and Riordan, 19). Female athletes were used as a political tool to strengthen the Eastern Bloc influence on the international sport scene (Pfister, 171). East European nations paid a great deal of attention to women's international sport, contrasting the "relative neglect in both the more enlightened nations of the West and in developing states" (Riordan and Cantelon, "The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe," 95). One East German sports official, Otto Schmidt, noted that "while other nations can produce men's teams as good as, if not better than, ours, we beat them overall because they are not tapping the full potential of their women" (Riordan and Cantelon, "The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe," 95). Female athletes were targeted in turn for success at the international level without regard for medical and aesthetic dogma (Pfister, "Sport for Women," 172).

Communist female sports bodies were in service of the nation beyond the roles of wives and mothers. These female athletes became champion vehicles for Communist ideology through their international sporting success. This desire to promote political ideology through sport often trumped traditional Western sexist and heterosexist opinions of the appropriate and desirable female body. It became more important for female athletes to lift weights than wear makeup. Strong, muscular, athletic women were celebrated as heroines and icons in Communist countries, not derided as Amazons or freaks. Lenskyj has noted that the narrow definition of heterosexual femininity did not apply to Eastern European athletes (*Out of Bounds*, 92). These women were "capable of viewing themselves as attractive, sexual women, not by their measurements, but because of who they are as human beings" (Kelly).

Importance was placed on winning and female athletes were just as eager as their male counterparts to capture gold medals. As such, they placed themselves in the ideal environment to achieve athletic success. Kevin B. Wamsley and Gertrud Pfister have noted that:

...full-time training aided by sport science, which included extensive weight lifting programmes, altered the physiological make-up of Olympic bodies. The gender polarities, long sustained through competitive sport, became blurred as female athletes generally became bigger and stronger ("Olympic Men and Women," 119).

For example, elite Eastern European oarswomen's larger size gave the appearance that they looked 'manly' and unfeminine, different from their female competitors from the West (Dieterle). The Western print and television media feared that the superiority of female athletes from the Eastern Bloc would ruin Western athletes' chances to win Olympic and world championships medals. They ridiculed the 'strong Red ladies' and were instrumental in implying deviant sexuality of successful Eastern Bloc female athletes. Western athletes were praised for their "good looks and charming ways," while competitors who opted to be "athletes first, girls second" were ridiculed for their "overdeveloped muscles and underdeveloped glands" (Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 207). They referred to Eastern Bloc female athletes as Amazons, and commented on their ambiguous sexual appearance. Hargreaves has argued that "athletes who are heavily muscled, small-breasted, and do not display on their bodies the usual insignia of conventional femininity, face[d] insinuations about defeminization" (*Sporting Females*, 170). However, when successful Western female athletes also possessed masculine characteristics, journalists searched to find evidence of physical femininity as a means of justifying their masculine physical ability.

Correct heterosexual feminine and masculine behaviour was an important component of Western notions of superiority throughout the Cold War. Western women were depicted as graceful, beautiful, and compliant with heteronormative stereotypes, while 'their women' were depicted as ugly and deviant. Nagel has argued that the importance of proper gender role to community honour and respectability results in "inspection and enforcement of both formal and informal rules of sexual conduct" (*Ethnicity and Sexuality*, 113). This 'proper' role of women is arguably a "mask or a code for the political processes of state formation" (Einhorn, 2). The process of

establishing political boundaries between 'us,' the West, and 'them,' the East, was constructed in terms of political identity and gender identity.

During times of conflict, gender often becomes the symbolic marker that separates 'self' from 'other' (Peterson). Women often serve as symbolic markers of their ethnic and national collectives and they are viewed as repositories of traditions, reproducers of authenticity. During the Cold War, Western women's wholesome, beautiful, heteronormative image symbolized strength and democratic unity. The West, and ultimately democracy, supported traditional hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity; men were men and women were women. Conversely, Eastern Bloc nations, which were Communist, perverted the female body into an ugly masculine form. The success of female Eastern Bloc athletes did not symbolize development or even sexual equality to Western nations; rather it served to reinforce democracy. Democracy would never force women to trade their femininity for gold medals. The pervasive assumption that athletic excellence was incompatible with femininity and heterosexuality was rampant throughout the West. It was speculated that some Eastern Bloc oarswomen were in fact men disguised as women.

The wide-spread concern that these 'unfeminine' female athletes were dominating international sport, ultimately out-performing Western athletes, prompted physicians and sport administrators to re-examine the biological and social definitions of femininity (Mayglathing, 1987). Lenskyj has stated, "Clearly, sexual ambiguity, whether clinical or social, posed a threat to compulsory heterosexuality and male dominance" (Out of Bounds, 87). Cahn has argued that the deeper-seated anxiety of the disturbance of feminine beauty was pervasive because, "The presence of powerful women athletes struck at the roots of male dominance in American society – the seemingly natural physical superiority of men" (Coming on Strong, 207-208). Sport became a site where significant battles over gender identities and gender roles were fought. However, this 'gender disorder' concerned both women and men and those in decision-making positions in competitive international sport established what they thought was the ultimate way to clarify sexual ambiguity. Thus, sex testing was introduced to the international sport community to reassure the global community that female athletes were 'true' women and potentially as a way to explain why Eastern Bloc female athletes were out performing their Western counterparts.

Gender verification tests were introduced at the 1966 European Athletics Championship in Budapest, Hungary. It was here that female athletes were required to parade naked before a panel of gynaecologists and undergo a visual genital inspection (Ritchie). At the 1966 Commonwealth Games in Kingston, Jamaica, gynaecologic examinations were performed on all female competitors. A chromosome sex test was introduced at the 1967 European track and field championships in Kiev. It was here that the first athlete, Ewa Klobukowska of Poland, failed to prove her femininity. Klobukowska passed the visual inspection, but was later disqualified because she had one chromosome too many to qualify as a woman (Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 158). While these tests were implemented to relieve any speculations that male athletes were competing unfairly against female athletes, complaints and resentment arose from the female competitors regarding the embarrassing approach that had been taken (Schweinbenz, "Paddling Against the Current," 177).

When the IOC followed suit in 1968, and introduced gender verification testing at the Winter Games in Grenoble, France, and the Summer Games in Mexico City, Mexico, they implemented 'advanced' technology to weed out impostors. Only one in five female athletes was tested at the Games in Grenoble, but in the summer of 1968, the IOC tested each of the 781 female athletes at the Games in Mexico City. International sport federations were generally supportive of the testing as it helped to preserve the authenticity of women's events, however, they were opposed to the cumbersome and costly tests that they were required to perform outside of Olympic competition (Boultebee). The degrading and invasive gynaecological examination was replaced by a sex chromatin analysis (X chromatin or Barr body analysis), where scraps of cells from the inside of the mouth were analyzed for chromosomal purposes (Simpson et al. 1568). The rationale was to "detect male impostors who would have an unfair competitive advantage based on superior size, strength, and speed associated with androgen-enhanced skeletal muscle mass" (Dickinson et. al, 1539). One international sport medical commissioner argued:

The principles of fairness and ethics demand that only proven women should compete in women's competitions. Every athlete is therefore obliged, to avoid disagreeable occurrences [sic] that would undermine the ethical level of sports competition, [and] to submit to a single, non-repeatable, official medical examination when entering for a competition (Prokop).

However, the tests also served another purpose: to silence those who questioned the sexual identity of female competitors.

Scientists and physicians began to look for chromosomal anomalies in female athletes rather than secondary sex characteristics to determine whether or not female athletes were in fact women. Lenskyj has argued that ‘certain athletes,’ those who displayed visual signs of maleness, “were considered guilty of ‘masculinity’ until proven innocent” (Out of Bounds, 88). This form of gender verification has “symbolized the idea of male athletic superiority” and “is the most potent symbol of the concern to prove that there is an absolute distinction between the sexes” (Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 222). Female athletes were required to ‘prove’ themselves according to heterosexual standards of femininity. Naturally muscular and flat-chested women were specifically targeted as sexually ambiguous and were scrutinized with particular insensitivity during testing. Lenskyj has noted:

Following the 1968 Olympics, the chief sex tester, Ludwig Prokop, told reporters that his examination of 911 female athletes had convinced him that sports made them ugly, with hard, stringy bodies and, in some cases, hair on their chests (Out of Bounds, 89).

While the concern regarding masculine and sexually ambiguous athletes became an important part of international sport during the Cold War, Ann Hall has stated:

Sex testing arose out of a contradiction: Olympic competition for women was becoming more rigorous, requiring athletes to be stronger, faster, and increasingly competitive; yet, at the same time they must look like women, and, most important of all, their femaleness had to be ‘scientifically’ assured (The Girl and the Game, 158).

What is even more interesting, no male Olympic athletes have ever had to be part of ‘masculinity control’ testing, because no one had been concerned that a woman would, or could, ever impersonate a man to compete in an athletic competition. It was female athletes that required protection from evil wrong-doers, men’s sport was considered safe.

Concerns of male athletes masquerading as women were not new to the Olympic Movement. In 1936, American sprinter Helen Stephens was forced to prove that she was in fact a woman after she won the women’s 100m final in a time of 11.7 seconds. The Polish Olympic delegation was convinced that no woman was capable of achieving such a time, especially since their runner

Stanislawa Waliasiewicz (Stella Walsh) who had won this same event at the 1932 Games, had been beaten by Stephens. They demanded that Stephens undergo a gynecological gender test to prove that she was in fact female. There were others who questioned the validity of both of these female Olympians, as well as others at the 1936 Games. Canada's Alexandrine Gibb called for physical examinations of all athletes wishing to compete as women, "I had a dressing room full of Canadian girls weeping because they had to toe the mark against girls who shaved and spoke in mannish tones!" (Hall, *The Girl and the Game*, 93). Interestingly, forty years after these Games, Walsh was murdered in a parking lot in Cleveland and after an autopsy it was shown that she possessed male sex characteristics that would have rendered her ineligible if she would have been a competitor during the era of IOC gender verification (Boylan).

Like their predecessors, female athletes of the Cold War began to adopt overtly feminine behaviours in order to further prove their gender and sexual validity. Female athletes were encouraged to marry prior to commencing training for elite sport because they risked men resenting their training and masculine figures. Those who were married felt pressure to showcase their relationships to reassure the public of their heterosexuality. Housewives and mothers were recognized for their athletic accomplishments, but applauded for their commitment to their families. Makeup was considered compulsory as well as dresses and high heels. However, despite many Eastern Bloc female athletes' adoption of these reinforcements, many remained under fire. For example, East German swimmer and gold medalist at the 1976 Games in Montréal, Kornelia Ender, was constantly questioned about her sexuality and gender despite the fact that she was engaged to a member of the East German men's swim team.

It was not only female athletes who went to great lengths to prove heterosexual femininity, sport administrators also took it upon themselves to provide evidence that elite sport did not hinder women's natural femininity. For example, when FISA applied for the inclusion of women's rowing events onto the Olympic Programme, FISA President Thomas Keller presented the popular Western image of heterosexual femininity to the IOC. By presenting Dutch single sculler Ingrid Maria Dussuldorp to the IOC as the image of women's competitive international rowing, he challenged the common perception that successful oarswomen were strong and ugly. "She had charisma," recalled FISA Women's Commission official Ingrid Dieterle "she was strong, tall, but she was not fat" (Dieterle

interview). By introducing the all-male IOC Executive Board to an attractive, feminine oarswoman, Keller reassured worried delegates that rowing would not masculinize female athletes, but rather would help to develop their feminine qualities. Some believed that this tactic was the key to Keller's success:

Thomi Keller ... realized that if he could get women's rowing in the Olympics that was going to be the feather in the cap of rowing. So, in fact ... they got this super looking Dutch female; [Thomi] shouldn't have done it that way, but it served a purpose and she was in front of all the old men in the International Olympic Committee and she had fantastic legs and a beautiful figure and long fair hair ... And ya, I mean Thomi Keller picked her out and she just won them all over and we got rowing in the Olympics '76 (Chuter interview).

Indeed Keller was successful. The IOC Executive Board recommended that women's rowing events be included at the 1976 Olympic Games and also amended rule twenty-nine of the IOC *Olympic Charter* to include women's rowing on the list of sports on the Olympic program and oarswomen raced for the first time at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montréal, Canada (IOC, Executive Board, 1972).

The IOC had claimed that "the aim of gender verification tests is not to differentiate between sexes but to prevent male imposters from participating in female competitions" (Simpson et al.). While no man was ever caught competing in women-only events at the Olympic Games, there have been several women who have been expelled from sport for failing the gender verification test. Through these tests, gender is seen as black and white and athletes as either male or female. If female athletes possessed a Y chromosome or Y chromosomal material, then they were banned from sport and faced public humiliation. Yet, it is widely recognized that gender is more complex than the mere appearance of a Y chromosome:

The easy assumption has been that there are two quite separate roads [to gender identity], one leading from XY chromosomes at conception to manhood, and the other from XX chromosomes at conception to womanhood. But...scientists are uncovering a different picture. The fact is that there are not two roads, but one road with a number of forks where each of us turns in either the male or the female direction. You became male or female by stages. Most of us turn smoothly in the same direction at each fork ... the

difference between male and female is not black and white; it is a biologic continuum (Money & Tucker, 6).

For over thirty years, women were banned from sport because they tested positive for 'maleness'. However, these tests do not actually test for 'femaleness' or 'maleness,' they test for the presence of a Y chromosome or Y chromosomal material (Boylan). In the five Olympics preceding Sydney in 2000, it was found that one in every four hundred and twenty-one female athletes have some form of pseudo-hermaphrodite condition which would cause them to test positive for 'maleness' (Dickinson). Androgen insensitivity is one of the more common disorders. This condition means that although a woman may have a Y chromosome or Y chromosomal material, her body does not respond to this genetic material. A woman may live her entire life without knowing this.

For example, in 1985, Spanish hurdler Maria Patino attended the World University Games in Kobe, Japan and was required to undergo the mandatory gender verification test prior to competition. This test was a routine examination for Patino, or so she thought. Shortly after taking the test it was revealed that she had androgen insensitivity, which meant she possessed Y chromosomal material and she had small testes inside of her body. She was asked by officials to fake an injury and quietly step down from the championships or else her results would be leaked to the press. Patino ignored the request, kept training and won her race. The very next day her secret was released to the public. She lost her athletic residence in Spain, her scholarship, as well as all her past titles and records. When she was informed that the test had shown that she was not a woman, she told the press, "I knew I was a woman in the eyes of medicine, God, and, most of all, in my own eyes ... If I hadn't been an athlete, my femininity would never have been questioned" (Second Type Women).

Recently, questions of gender verification have once again surfaced. In July of 2009, South African sprinter Caster Semenya was asked to prove to the world that she was a 'true' woman. Questions regarding the 800m sprinter's gender arose from spectators, competitors, international track and field officials and the international media because of her perceived masculine appearance and superior athletic abilities. Semenya won the African Junior Track and Field Championships after she shaved more than seven seconds off of her 2008 personal best time. At first it was thought she had taken performance-enhancing substances, but those concerns were soon replaced.

The international media quickly descended on the story, and constructed two different, yet related narratives about Semenya. She was portrayed as a victim, but also became the object of ridicule. It was argued that she was not at fault; she genetically has more testosterone than most women but her parents raised her as a woman and this constitutes her identity (Hurst). The South African track and field federation was blamed for failing to disclose their own questions about her gender. And Kai Wright argued that she was a victim of “Western culture’s desperate, frightened effort to maintain the fiction of binary, fixed gender” (Semenya’s Race and Sex Struggle). Yet even those who suggested that they supported Semenya’s athletic excellence and were appalled by the IAAF’s demands for gender verification, despite the fact that the IAAF had eliminated gender verification in 1990, readily mocked the athletic superstar:

The tipoff might have been that she looks like a man. She has a man's musculature, flat chest and thicker facial features. She has a deep voice, too. I'm ashamed to admit that when I saw her picture, I too rushed to judgment. “That's a man,” I thought (Wente).

Allegations that Semenya has no ovaries, no womb, and is a hermaphrodite were spread across the world. What did become clear after the all the tests were completed was that the “old, ugly paradox is alive and well in women's sport: The same giant quadriceps and bulky shoulders that can clinch championships make athletes look ‘unfeminine’ in the eyes of the world” (Mick).

Conclusion

In 1990, the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) called for an end to the required gender verification of female athletes and in 1992, they adopted an approach that was designed to prevent male imposters from competing (Ferris). Yet, the IOC refused to follow the IAAF’s lead in this matter. In fact, the IOC further enhanced their testing procedure and replaced sex chromatin testing with DNA analysis for Y chromosome material. Due to the IOC’s refusal to abolish these tests, the Norwegian government refused to assist the IOC with their testing during the 1994 Winter Games in Lillehammer; they declared the tests “illegal and unethical” (Ljungqvist, 229). In 1999, the IOC bowed to intense pressure and the Executive Committee unanimously approved the recommendation by the IOC Athlete’s Commission to discontinue

genetic-based sex testing of female athletes at the Olympic Games (Genel). The 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, were the first Games in thirty-two years that had no mandatory gender verification testing.

While the introduction of gender verification testing at the Olympic Games was intended to prevent male athletes from competing in women-only events, these tests signified overt heterosexism and nationalism. Sport administrators were so disturbed by the physical development of competitive female athletes that they set forth to reassure themselves and the rest of the world that these athletes were in fact women. Additionally, administrators sought an explanation for the superior athletic performances of former Eastern Bloc female athletes which, coupled with their more muscular physiques, did not conform to western heteronormative femininity. Gender verification reinforced the heterosexist opinion that athletic excellence was incompatible with femininity.

Female athletes have struggled to negotiate their desire to be strong, muscular, and competitive with heteronormative femininity. Those who have conformed to the accepted image of the heterosexual feminine athletes have reaped the benefits of media attention, endorsements, and even fan approval. Nonconformity continues to result in overt heterosexist discrimination. As we saw in the summer of 2009, there remains the perception that female athletes whose visual appearance does not conform to traditional ideas of femininity are deviant. Semenya was a young track star who was believed to be a man because of her superior athletic performance and her 'masculine' appearance and was forced to endure gender verification despite the elimination of these tests at international competitions.

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