


6-11-2019

Sex Identity and the IAAF

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Sex Identity and the IAAF" (2019). *On Sport and Society*. 845.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/845>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - SEX IDENTITY AND THE IAAF
JUNE 11, 2019

For several weeks, now I have been thinking about a major controversy in sport, namely the issue of sex identification as it pertains to the world of athletics. On May 1, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) ruled in favor of the decision of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) requiring female track athletes with elevated levels of testosterone to lower those levels when competing in the 400 and 800 meter events. The court, however, did not uphold the IAAF application of the rule to the 1500 meter and mile events.

The ruling has centered primarily on the South African runner Caster Semenya, who has dominated the 800 meter event and whose sexual identity has been questioned for the past decade. In 2009, when she was eighteen years old and won gold in an 800 meter race, one of her competitors charged that Semenya was a man. In 2011, the IAAF issued regulations on testosterone levels for female competitors. In 2015, the Court of Arbitration for Sport overturned these regulations.

The IAAF then rewrote its regulations requiring that all female athletes with differences in sexual development lower their testosterone levels if they wished to compete in races from 400m to a mile. In its May 1 ruling, the court upheld the regulations for the 400m and 800m races but suggested that the IAAF not apply them to the 1500m and mile races until there was more evidence to support the ruling. Sebastian Coe, head of the IAAF, said the organization would not follow that suggestion and would implement the regulations in all of the events.

This eliminated Caster Semenya, the two time Olympic gold medalist in the 800m event, and any other female athletes with high testosterone levels from competing without lowering their testosterone levels. Semenya went to the Swiss supreme federal court, and they granted what amounted to a temporary injunction against the IAAF until a June 25 hearing, at which time the IAAF can present its case to the Swiss court. Semenya won the 800m event at Doha on May 3. Whether this will be her last 800m gold medal remains to be seen.

So what is involved in this controversy? If Semenya or any other woman with naturally high levels of testosterone seek to lower those levels, they have only a few options. They could have a surgical procedure to remove their testes, or they could take drugs to lower their natural testosterone levels. The side effects of the surgical procedure are potentially serious, both medically and psychologically. The potential side effects of the drugs are also uncertain and/or dangerous.

What is certain is the questionable ethics of forcing surgery or drugs on people to alter their natural physical condition. Why performance diminishing, which is the desired effect of these options, is any more legitimate than performance enhancing with drugs or procedures, seems self-evident.

As to testosterone levels and the physiology of testosterone production and processing in the human body, the science is not conclusive. The issue of what role testosterone plays in elite athletic performance is not entirely clear. Are there other factors, such as training and determination that are more important to performance than testosterone?

Coming back to Caster Semenya, there is another issue. Has the IAAF discriminated against her? She claims, that it has. The fact that Sebastian Coe has singled her out for denigrating comment suggests that it is the case. Also the fact that the IAAF announced that it would not follow the CAS suggestion that the ruling not be implemented immediately for the 1500m and mile races suggests to Semenya and others that she is a target.

Over the course of a decade, Caster Semenya has been hounded by those who claim she is not a woman. These have been her competitors, track officials, and journalists. She has been subjected to multiple and often humiliating, sex verification tests. Having been through all of this, Semenya will no doubt continue the fight, as she has said, "I am a woman and I am a world-class athlete," and the "IAAF will not drug me or stop me from being who I am." She vows she will not stop running.

The IAAF insists that Semenya is not their target but that they are protecting the concept of female competition. They point to the fact that over the past decade no one with normal female testosterone levels has won a middle distance event when competing against athletes with levels of testosterone above the female

norms. To the IAAF and others the integrity and future of female athletic competition is at stake.

The arguments are many and, at times, heated. However, it seems to me that there is enough ambiguity in the science to overrule the IAAF regulations. Any number of international medical organizations have weighed in against the regulations for a variety of reasons. It also seems that recent developments in social norms and scientific definitions of sexual identity lean heavily against the IAAF rulings.

In an interview published at panamericanworld.com, Bruce Kidd, the Canadian Olympic runner and respected scholar of sport, had the following reaction to the ruling by the Court of Arbitration for Sport: "From my point of view, the IAAF policy mistakes the science, flies in the face of best practice in policy-making, overrides human rights and will cause tremendous anxiety and even harm among the female athletes in the world, particularly those in the Global South. Even the CAS decision cautions that there are serious problems with the policy, including the potential for harm it will cause among women it targets."

Kidd went on to elaborate on many other issues involved. I have always respected his judgement, and, for me, his is the definitive word.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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