



Northwestern
University

Making Sense of a Divided Sport: A View from the Track and the Field

Play the Game 2019

13th October, 2019, Colorado Springs

Dr. Madeleine Pape

Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Sociology,

Northwestern University

madeleine.pape@northwestern.edu | [@Madeleine_Pape](https://twitter.com/Madeleine_Pape)



Who am I?

A view from the track, and the field...

- Former 800m runner for Australia, 2008 Olympian
- Competed at the 2009 World Championships in Berlin
- PhD in Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison (2019)
- Witness in 2015 Dutee Chand appeal to the CAS

Presentation Outline

- Insights from my own experience since Berlin
- Insights from my research on the elite track-and-field community
- How can we think about track-and-field as a divided sport?
- Next steps, or at least, some questions...

Terminology

Gender/Sex: Entangled in our language, and entangled in our lived experience.

“Female” and “male”: These are the binary terms we use for competition categories, though they are never purely biological or internally coherent.

Women with high testosterone: My preferred way to refer to women with variations in their sexual development, though this is not the terminology adopted by the CAS, IOC, or IAAF.

Intersex: I don't use unless someone claims intersex as their identity. Many elite female athletes with high testosterone identify as females and as women, not as intersex women.

Ten Years in Review: From Berlin to Colorado Springs

- **Change in career** (injury led to grad school abroad)
- **Change in understanding of the biology** of sex difference and athletic performance (discovered Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body*)
- **Change in ideological environment** (enabled me to hear out and consider the legitimacy of alternative points of view)
- **Change in understanding of the stakes** of regulating inclusion in women's sport (became friends with women with high testosterone and trans women)

Why was I so uncritical as an athlete in Berlin in 2009?

And, how much has changed?

Dissertation project included interviews with 65 elite athletes, coaches, media commentators and journalists, team officials, and experts involved in this issue (eight countries).

Overarching themes:

Misunderstanding and misinformation

Opinions (and policies) driven by ideology rather than science

Institutional racism

Deep fear of change and the unknown (trans-fear)

- Athletes often have limited understanding of the complex scientific debates around testosterone and its relationship to sex differences in performance
- Stakeholders form their opinions in spite of or without rather than because of or with scientific evidence
- Governing bodies and team management do little to educate and promote only their version of the story.

→ *Relatedly, much information exchange goes on informally and via social media*

- Women of color from Global South nations are believed to be the appropriate focus of scrutiny and regulatory interventions.
- Extensive underlying fear related to the increased participation of trans women and what it will mean for women's sport.

More complex than one “side” being “right” and the other
being “wrong” ...

A Divided (and Unequal) Sport: Gender

Year event added to Olympic Programme for Women

1960 – 800m (*1896 for men*)

1984 – Marathon (*1896 for men*)

1988 – 10,000m (*1912 for men*)

1996 – 5000m (*1912 for men*)

2000 – 20km walk (*1956 for men*)

2000 – Pole vault (*1896 for men*)

2008 – 3km steeple (*1920 for men*)

Not to mention vast under-representation of women in leadership /
decision-making bodies.

A Divided (and Unequal) Sport: Gender

- Female athletes have gained **representation numerically**, but are still **undervalued symbolically and materially** in many sports in comparison with male athletes.
- Female athletes continue to be considered to be a **protected category** due to assumption (not without evidence) that on average, elite adult male athletes outperform elite adult female athletes.
- In track-and-field and Olympic sports, governing bodies feel it is necessary to regulate who can compete as a female athlete (but not the male category).

An Ideologically Divided Sport

We all want what's best for women...

but we disagree on what that looks like, because we are committed to different understandings of what a **woman** is, and how we should go about pursuing **gender equality**.

An Ideologically Divided Sport

We're not alone - mirrors fundamental differences amongst feminists!

DIFFERENCE
FEMINISM

COMPLEXITY
FEMINISM

ABOLISH GENDER
FEMINISM



Define women as fundamentally different from men, and use binary difference as a platform to demand equal inclusion

Approach women's interests as best advanced by challenging binary and essentialist understandings of female/male

An Ideologically Divided Sport

Difference feminism reigns in track-and-field:

- Women believed to be fundamentally distinct from men; strict, binary distinction presumed necessary for women's sport to exist
- "Female" defined narrowly so as to only grant unconditional recognition to certain athletes.

Important: "Difference feminism" is not the only model of inclusion available to women, or to governing bodies, but it is more compatible with our existing social and institutional structures, which assume binary difference.

Path of greatest familiarity and least resistance.

How do we get beyond the impasse to depolarize this emotionally charged topic and enable listening, understanding, and respectful dialogue?

What kind of education efforts could be undertaken by the IAAF and IOC? Women's sports organizations? LGBTQI organizations? Athlete representative bodies?

What are the conditions for enabling more compassionate and considered (and less fear driven) discussions about female eligibility?

What role should science play and how should it be balanced alongside other considerations, such as disproportionate impact on women of color from Global South nations?

Thank you for listening and to Play the Game organizers.

madeleine.pape@northwestern.edu
@Madeleine_Pape



Northwestern
University