Sex Tested, Gender Verified: Controlling Female Sexuality in the Age of Containment

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Wake up, young people, from your illusory pleasures; strip off your disguises and recall that every one of you has a sex, a true sex.¹

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct.²

Michel Foucault’s words above neatly summarize the overriding concern of this paper: the emergence and control of modern sexuality, specifically the socio-historical construction of the sexual body in sport. What follows is the history of a sport policy. The so-called “sex test” policy and its concomitant battery of verification procedures was imposed upon elite female athletes in major international athletic competitions from the 1960s until the IOC’s recent decision to cancel testing in the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games.³ The procedure—referred to synonymously as “sex testing,” “gender verification,” or “femininity controls”—required that women entered in major international competitions—most notably and visibly the Olympic Games—undergo either a chromosomal or physical inspection in order to “verify” their femininity. Although the specific reasons for its implementation were never cited formerly in International Olympic Committee publications, the test’s apparent purpose was to guard against men posing as females in women’s athletic competition.⁴

However, beneath the sex test’s “ethical” integument lay sport’s gendered practices and institutions, ones through which athletes became markers of social-sexual normalcy and deviancy. The history of the sex test presents an opportunity to trace several gender-based facets of modern sport. These include the social construction and control of sex and sexuality; the operation of social and political power in and through the body in sport; the hegemony of male-controlled scientific and medical disciplines

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and their ability to define what is “natural”; and, in general, ever-fluctuating gender relations manifested in and through sport. This history, then, considers the sex test not as an ethical dilemma in which the question of fairness in competition is at stake, nor does it consider testing in terms of efficacy or which technical mechanisms might best “measure” sex. Rather, the sex test is considered as the logical effect of historical practices of modern sport that have sought to verify the socially constructed category of gender. Sex accrues from gender, not the other way around.

The historical rendering of the sex test, then, follows that in the tradition of cultural studies in which the body is thought of as a site of cultural struggle, reflecting, reinforcing, and sometimes challenging dominant hegemonic notions of what are culturally accepted and rejected socio-physical practices. At stake is what we regard as “normal” versus “pathological,” and that which is redeemed or treated as abject in the social landscape. More specifically, this history follows that of other gender and sexual histories, which trace cultural struggles to define both male- and female-appropriate social behaviours and roles within a hegemonic patriarchal context. In particular, sex testing represents the biological imperative inherent to modern patriarchal ideology: that sex differences are inherent, natural, unchangeable and therefore unchallengeable. Sport, it will be maintained, has been particularly conducive to the reinforcement of this ideology because of the belief that sport is unaffected by social and political matters. Sport is particularly conducive to this sort of patriarchal “evidence” of differences, in that common perceptions see sport as lying “outside” society and, as such, sport appears as a testing ground for natural differences.

The history that follows concentrates on the period of time leading up to the implementation of the first tests in the 1960s and then traces important changes in both medical and public debates regarding testing from the 1960s to the present. However, much of the socio-historical environment—both general and sport-specific—that made testing possible in the first place is traced back to the pre-World War II era. The sex testing policies and procedures are situated within the socio-historical context in which various practices and institutions of sport in Western nations reinforced traditional notions of gender and (hetero)sexuality, and the specific Cold War context in which international athletes became sexual markers of nationhood. Finally, both sex testing and its historical antecedents are theorized in terms of sport’s particular ability to delineate and reinforce the normal and pathological in human social-sexual affairs.

The Sexualized Body in the History of Sport

*The Normal and the Pathological in Sport*

Sport as an institutionalized social practice has vigilantly reinforced the idea that men’s and women’s “natural” constitutions and, by