

Testing Sex, Attributing Gender: What Caster Semenya Means to Women's Sports

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The highly-publicized case of Caster Semenya is a symptom of deeper problems that continue to plague women athletes at all levels—biased gender identification and a belief that sport and femininity do not mesh. I trace my own path through the thickets of “angry feminism,” a love of sports, stereotypes of the “fair” sex, and a 4-year-old nephew’s confused claim that Aunt Susan is a man. I examine symbols, body parts, gestures, clothing and other means by which men and women are unevenly (and often inaccurately and unfairly) identified. I note that in spite of new opportunities enjoyed by women to run, jump, compete and otherwise celebrate their physicality, female athletes still struggle to maintain their identity as “normal.” I see dangers in a world that forces its citizens into one of two gender boxes, but I also acknowledge gender as an important part of human identity and sporting opportunity. I conclude that I do not have any solutions, only questions. But I am certain that we should be able to play in a world where none of us is robbed of our joy.

In August 2009, 18-year-old Caster Semenya blew away her opponents at the World Track and Field Championship’s 800 m race in Berlin. Earlier that day, she had faced another grueling event, a gynecological test held because of complaints that Semenya must be a man. Thus began a story that captured worldwide attention in a way that this rural South African teenager, new to international competition, could never have imagined. Specialists in genetics, endocrinology, gynecology, and psychology picked over Semenya’s body and mind to answer the seemingly simple question: Is Semenya a woman or a man?

Socially, Caster is clearly a woman: identified as a female at birth, raised as a girl, self-identifying as a woman and accepted by those who knew her as such. Scientifically, does this make her a female? The answer is not clear-cut, given the many genetic, anatomical, and hormonal variations that muddy the waters of our two-sexed system. But we can say for sure that any determination made by the governing bodies of sports is a social one, not a scientific one because, as scientist Alice Dreger remarks, while “humans like categories neat . . . nature is a slob” (Clarey, 2009, quoting Dreger). Accordingly, the “decision will be like the consensus regarding how many points are awarded for a touchdown and a field goal—it will

be a sporting decision, not a natural one, about how we choose to play the game of sex” (Dreger, 2009).

Caster Semenya’s situation is rare indeed. If she does happen to be intersexed—and this is nowhere publicly confirmed—experts estimate that only one in 2,000 persons are born with some kind of ambiguity of sex or, in current medical-speak, Disorders (or preferably, “differences”) of Sex Development (DSD). Yet I think her predicament is highly relevant to the general situation of women’s sports in North America and beyond. In my talk today, I will relate Semenya’s seemingly singular predicament to two recurrent dilemmas. The first is a problem common to both feminism and women’s sports: How should we approach the question of sexual difference? Do we accept some notion of either natural or social sex/gender difference and work with a two-gender model in sports (i.e., a separate men’s and women’s gymnastics competition, men’s hockey and women’s hockey), or do we argue that all differences are artificial and endeavor to create alternatives to sex segregated sports?

The second problem is one I find more disturbing. Despite the astounding increase in the acceptance and sheer numbers of girls and women in sports over the last four decades, why is it that many athletes believe *other people* still question their femininity and sexual identity—jeopardizing their status as a “normal” woman. “If you’re good, if you’re a top athlete, you’re gay. Well that’s how some people perceive you,” one high school girl explained, demonstrating the time-honored logic that if sports are masculine, and lesbians are masculine, then women athletes must be lesbians. This study reported that teenagers were “constantly involved in a balancing act to prove that yes, they are athletes, but they are also ‘girly girls’” (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005, pp. 22–23). The very fact that they are competing in a *girls’* or *women’s* competition and not being pulled out for sex testing means that their sex is not in question. Yet I argue that the problems of everyday athletes have everything to do with the torment of Caster Semenya and the strategic dilemma of how feminism tries to liberate women’s bodies of all kinds. I am going to make this argument by taking a very circuitous path. I will revisit my own childhood love of sports and—to steal a phrase from Judith Butler (1990)—my gender trouble.

I was an athlete before I was a feminist, or at least before I knew I was a feminist. My first year of high school was 1972, the year Title IX passed. We played four interscholastic basketball games and the next year began league play. I had an instinctive antennae for injustice, well aware that the boys practiced in the big gym every day, had shiny satin uniforms, and living, breathing fans, but did I have a sense of feminist entitlement? No, I knew only that “some law had passed” and the subject of feminism made me a little nervous. I have a distinct memory of standing in my kitchen at about age fourteen talking to my friend Max, saying “I mean, I support equal rights, but I’m no bra burning women’s liber.” This language did not come from any genuine political awareness; I was aping what I heard around me, and trying to position myself on the side of justice *and* acceptability—a tightrope walk if there ever was one.

Yet, by sixteen I had become an ardent feminist, at seventeen left Chicago for a job in Berkeley, and stopped playing sports for an entire year because I thought sports was part of the patriarchy. Embracing feminism meant rejecting sports, until I missed basketball so much I broke down and bought a ball to shoot hoops

by myself. This relationship between sports and feminism confused me and, in many ways, is still a relationship more assumed than studied. The goal of gender equity in organized sports is a critical feminist goal, and the data proving the health benefits of athletic activity show that the commitment to girls' and women's sports matters. Yet, there is another commitment to the body that radical feminists of the 1970s made, a plan to liberate the body from *any* constraints imposed for the simple reason that we were female.

Feminism: B(e)aring the Bra, B(e)aring the Breast

One way to revisit the feminist notion of a liberated body is to consider several iconic moments, rarely compared, in which women bared breasts, bras, or body parts to the public. The first is the image of "women's libbers" tossing their bras into a great freedom trash can and, according to myth only, setting fire to the contents. What did the classic, if erroneous, "bra burning" moment represent? It meant *not* being a sex symbol, rejecting the mandatory uniform of femininity, and allowing the breasts to breathe and move a bit more freely. But this meaning was lost to most people, and quickly came to represent the stridency of angry women. When I defined myself against this image it was not a fear of appearing strident, because at that age I would stridently argue the color of water. But the hostile response to "angry feminists" scared me. Anyway, I was more stubborn than angry; upon reaching puberty I simply refused to wear a bra. This was not due to any precocious feminism, but a sign of my discomfort in becoming a woman. Bras meant breasts, meant growing up, meant restriction, holding my knees together, and growing full-figured in a way I was certain meant the end of athletic activity. I didn't want to lose my ability to slice through an opening on the basketball court or to bang head-on into an opponent in a front yard game of tackle football. I was caught in a classic female dilemma—the knowledge that sports and femininity did not mesh. And, truthfully, I didn't really care. I understood there was a choice to be made between athlete and woman, and I knew that becoming a woman, though inevitable, was my second choice. So I clung to my fragile identity; if athletic cups were not for me, neither were the ABC's of women's cups.

Soon after, I made my high school basketball team and found that a bra had some practical use, protecting my skin from the horrible chafing of a pine green polyester uniform so stiff it could practically stand up by itself. Within a decade or so, athletic wear improved and people began wearing sports bras, not as a protection against athletic clothing, but as one of its essential items. The sports bra signified a veritable sea change in women's sports, a transformation in facts and figures evident in the exponential growth of athletic participation and in literal changes in the figures of women. These developments underlie my next iconic moment, the USA soccer team's victory in the 1999 World Cup when Brandi Chastain, following the custom of soccer players world over, ripped off her jersey and swung it gloriously overhead. A simple celebratory gesture? As simple as throwing a bra in a trash can.

Celebration turned to scandal as horrified or gleeful viewers debated the meaning of her act. Was she stripping? Baring her breasts? No Chastain wore a sports bra, her breasts didn't even make an appearance. Besides, at that moment, her breasts were no more sexual than her stomach, her ribs, and her shoulders—which *were*

revealed when she pulled off her jersey. They were parts of an athletic body, with a bra that covered not so much breasts as a chest, used in soccer to control the ball. But in the eyes of critics the gesture revealed much that was wrong with women's sports. To some it was obscene—a televised striptease. Or a financially motivated “wardrobe malfunction” showcasing the Nike bra Chastain soon endorsed.

For me the gesture was positive. The moment captured the loveliness of a life lived full tilt—the culmination of years of physical dedication, fantastic skill, intensely competitive spirit—all the things I had so desperately wanted to be part of as a girl. Yet, others saw the act as undeniably sexual. When Chastain yanked her jersey off and viewers saw—not the shirt, not the triumph, not her whole torso, not even her bra but BREASTS, it called forth a long history of the sexualized female body, whether praised or condemned.

Not all bodies are praiseworthy. Only *certain* women win this reward: tall, lithe, tan but preferably still white, with long hair, best when pulled into a ponytail to create a sheen of wholesomeness. Beach volleyball, for example, has replaced soccer as the darling of women's Olympic sports. Where are the respect, admiration, endorsement contracts, and recognition of beauty for those who don't fit this image? Or for the sexually suspect—either lesbian athletes or Caster Semenya, whose biological sex itself has become suspect.

Semenya's situation has its own deep historical roots. Two centuries ago, French and English scientists brought South Africa's Saartjie Baartman to Europe as a museum exhibit. Under a regimen of scientific racism, “experts” saw African sexual anatomy as excessive and thus more primitive, a sign of racial inferiority. Baartman was examined and measured, then forced to display her so-called *aberrant* genitalia and buttocks before ogling museum audiences, an exposure that even death did not end. In 1816, scientists placed Baartman's dissected, preserved genitalia on permanent display in a Paris Museum (Ray, 2009).¹ A few decades later, Sojourner Truth tore away her dress and bared her breast before a crowd of whites to make a simple point: she, too, was a woman. Excluded from the “fair” sex, Truth claimed herself the equal of white women whose comforts and feminine refinement her own hard physical labor produced. Her black body, like Baartman's and Semenya's, became an object of inspection and derision in a culture that posited white femininity as the opposite of black women's reputed masculinity and sexual excess.

Sadly, we need not travel back in time more than a few years for evidence of this phenomenon. At the 2007 NCAA basketball championship, Don Imus and his radio producer called the Rutgers team “nappy headed ho's” and a bunch of “rough girls” with tattoos. Here Imus sexualized a group of predominately African American women as “whores,” selling sex to men, although what he meant was in fact the opposite, that the players were masculine, unsuitable sex objects worthy of contempt. The Rutgers incident at least had a positive resolution. Fans around the country shared a protective response: “These could be *our* daughters you are slandering” they seemed to say, temporarily embracing young black women within a large, caring biracial family. Moreover, the Rutgers players answered the attack by naming it for what it was: sexist and racist. Players spoke also of being robbed of their joy. Contrast this with Chastain's celebrated moment of joy. Accusers claimed her gesture was “too sexual.” The Rutgers team, whose jerseys stayed on, faced the opposite criticism: they were either inappropriately sexual, “whores,” or failed women maligned as rough girls.

The Imus incident occurred less than four years ago. More positively, this December Baylor University fans broke a school attendance record for men's or women's basketball when they packed the stands for the Baylor–Tennessee game. As thousands cheered 6'8" center Brittney Griner on, I was aware of a nastier internet buzz about Griner, an African American with a slender frame and low voice. I tried a simple exercise, typing in "is Brittney Griner..." as a Google search. Immediately, my browser completed the search with the most frequently asked questions: Is Brittney Griner a man, gay, a hermaphrodite, a boy, a girl, a woman, and "a girl or a boy?"² It is time to look in the mirror, asking what we see reflected in women's sports, what others see, and how athletes understand these gendered perceptions.

OK, let's take a little detour to the bathroom to find a mirror. A hypothetical detour, anyway. [In original talk, this is presented with a change of tone and pace, accompanied by a picture of typical restroom signage] If you were to get up and go to the bathroom right now, how many of you would go through the door with this symbol — (person with dress), or this symbol (person with pants)? OK, look down at what you're wearing. If you took the signs literally, how many of you would go through the door with the dress . . . and the pants? [Most of audience is wearing pants]. What makes one the right door and not the wrong one?

Because we recognize it as a symbol, not a literal instruction, a sign informing us what genitals lie underneath the clothing. Now I haven't worn a dress in over 30 years and yet I still go to the door with a dress on it. And most of the time it works just fine. But every now and then others disagree with my learned response. "Um, excuse me, this is the women's bathroom." Or at an Oakland A's game when a policewoman stopped me from entering the restroom with an accusing, "this is for women." I pleaded innocent to the charge of manhood. These are experiences with adult strangers, but they frequently happen with children. An example: my four-year-old nephew's confusion when he found out my partner was coming to visit without me. Jake asked why "he" wasn't coming, only to be corrected and told I was a "she," to which he promptly responded, "No, Aunt Susan is a man!" I give him credit, because he read almost all of the signals right: pants, short hair, on-the-floor wrestling matches like he has with his dad, and I came as part of a couple with a woman, which must make me the man.

Aunt Susan Is a Man, What Are You?

These episodes of confusion date back to my childhood and are intimately linked to sports. From ages nine to twelve I spent hours in front of my house pitching tennis balls against the stairs, scooping up the rebounding ground balls and throwing imaginary runners out at first base (also the stairs). Who was I? I was a girl, a "tomboy," but more importantly, at that moment I was Luis Apparichio, star shortstop of the Chicago White Sox. He was a man but only as a side effect of being a baseball player, which did not come in any other gender. My options were to imagine myself as I wished, or to accept that I could never grow up to be a major league ballplayer. *That* was what I wanted to be. And that is who I *was*

at that moment, reveling in baseball, my physicality, and an imagination elastic enough to keep my options open.

This was round 1968, the very beginning of second wave feminism. I had experienced my own gender evolution with a modicum of self-confidence. [In talk: three slides of me from age 3–9, looking gradually more “boyish”]. But apparently I disturbed others. Sometimes total strangers walking down the street stopped short and stared at me until I too stopped. Did they need directions? Instead they asked “What are you?” I *knew* what the question meant. I didn’t answer: a 5th grader, a white middle-class suburbanite, and certainly not “a shortstop, dummy.” No, I answered, “a girl.” And though *they* left and walked on, I felt rattled. Because the comments made me wonder where the error was: in the observer, or in me. And I was pretty sure it was in me. Sports were the cause *and* the solution for my so-called-problem.

From these years right up to the present I’ve been called a boy, or man, or now usually “sir,” about once every two to four weeks. Mostly I just take it in stride. But part of me has always been curious: What exactly do people see when they think I’m a male? Not even playing ball, but in a grocery checkout aisle, or sitting in an airplane (“Can I get you something to drink, sir?”).

To answer this question, I returned to a book I first read in graduate school by Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978), called *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, which studies precisely this process of gender attribution. [In talk, I presented accompanying visual images]. Each figure has either a penis or vagina—and I would say vulva, since no actual vaginas are portrayed. Each figure also has *one each* of four pairs of secondary characteristics (short or long hair; straight or curvy hips; breasts or a flat chest; hairy or smooth torso).³ All the various combinations of overlays create 96 possibilities. Ten test-takers were asked to label each figure male or female, and then rated how certain they felt about their identifications.

Upon analysis, the authors found that genitals are the key variable. But if this is the case, you would expect that figures with penises (whether they had from zero to four other “male” characteristics) would be labeled male 100% of the time and figures with vulvas, female 100%. But no, while a penis resulted in 96% male attribution, a vulva could be overlooked, earning only a 67% female identification. It took at least two other “female cues,” like long hair and breasts, to reach a 95% female identification rate.⁴ Kessler and McKenna conclude, “Gender attribution is, for the most part, genital attribution; and genital attribution is essentially penis attribution” (p. 153).

However, very seldom do we actually see the genitals of a person in a store, on the street, in class or at the gym, and yet we all make a gender attribution every time we lay eyes on a person. Kessler and McKenna argue that we make decisions on the basis of “cultural genitals,” defined as the genital that “is assumed to exist and which, it is believed, should be there” (p.154). To identify gender, people employ some combination of secondary sex characteristics (breasts, beard, voice timbre) and tertiary characteristics like facial expression, movement, dress, accessories, and paralinguistic behaviors: posture, spitting or snorting, etc.

Kessler and McKenna found that while *one* male cue might signal maleness, a “female” cue, by itself, does not signal femaleness. Thus, 57% of figures with breasts were identified as male, suggesting that the “only sign of femaleness is an

absence of male cues" (p. 150).⁵ Therefore, "to be male is to 'have' something and to be female is to 'not have' it" (p. 153). Caster Semenya has speed, power, muscle, a cut figure, a flat chest and deep voice. What did I "*have*" as a kid that other girls did not have? What do I still have? My *guess* is short hair, my choice of clothes, certain postures or a way of moving. What I know for sure is that in the initial moment of assessment, I "do" my gender in a way that *reads* "like-a-man," rather than "like-a-woman." And after that, the beholder does all the work.

Because the authors found that once a gender attribution is made, people filter almost any information, no matter how dissonant, through the male or female lens they first select. So you get a "husky voiced woman," or a "slightly-built" man. This explains my most perplexing cross-gender event, a party at my neighbors. They put out name tags, so I agreeably stuck mine on my shirt. When a middle-aged couple followed me in, the husband balked at the name tag on shirt. His wife said, "Come on honey, everyone else is doing it." He then pointed at me, wearing my big red Sharpie-lettered "SUSAN," and said: "Yeah, well look how serious that fellow's taking it!" I was stunned, and a bit ashamed. I spent the rest of the evening wondering what he had possibly seen; what is it about me that was so *male* to him that in less than a nanosecond he had gazed at my Susan—my self—and seen a male prankster? Again, who had the problem, him or me?

And this is where once and for all I get back to sports. Because sports provided me as a child (and still does) a way to be "girl/woman" that meshes perfectly with my own gender identity. I like to run and jump, to compete, to shoot baskets and throw balls, to get sweaty and dirty, to take contact and dish it out. Sports, that most gendered of arenas historically, is also a place where gender can be quite elastic. Today, athletic activities, postures, movements, musculature, and other attributes formerly known as male now fall under the umbrella of "womanly" behavior, which can include even the slam dunk and chest bump! This makes it easier for women who in the past may have felt some conflict about participating in a culturally-defined male activity. Now, not so much. Not *SO* much. Because, despite the apparently resounding success of Title IX and related changes, research shows that while women rarely feel they have to defend their *right* to play, they often still wrestle with the pull between (what we call) masculinity and femininity (Sabo, 2007).⁶

In "Living the Paradox," Vikki Krane and associates interviewed 21 varsity or club athletes at a midwestern Division I university. Nearly all reported wanting something closer to the "ideal" female body: smaller thighs, rear ends, or stomachs; less bulk in general; and defined but not large muscles. They associated having large developed muscles with "excess," or being "like men." A runner drew this distinction: "Muscle tone, yeah that's sexy. But, I guess I don't want to get too big or anything;" much like the softball player who admitted, "in the back of my mind I get scared . . . of looking too much like a guy, of having too much muscle" (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar and Kauer, 2007, p. 85, p. 87). Another study found that college athletes believed others stereotyped them as "jock girls," thus as lesbian or manly (Kauer and Krane, 2006, p. 46–47).⁷ Athletes also worried about their bodies. "In sports I don't really think about my body that much," reported a softball player. ". . . it's irrelevant . . . People look at us and how good do we play our sports, but when we're out [socially] . . . I feel really self-conscious about it, like if you see the girls that have big chests and little stomachs . . . [and] you're just a person that doesn't really have that good of a body" (Krane, et al., 2007, p. 90).⁸ Athletes exhibit a

kind of double consciousness, what scholars have called a conflict between the “athletic body” and the “social body” (Krane, et al., 2007, p. 83).

This discordance influences behaviors. A volleyball team wears hair ribbons “to remind all you people in the stands, we are still girls.” Off-field, athletes report “dressing up” to show “I can be more girly,” or wearing makeup “so people know that I’m not just an athlete—I am a girl too” (Krane, et al., p. 92–93).⁹ Knowing that athleticism reads as masculine (or lesbian—which they say quite clearly), athletes purposely create impressions of emphasized femininity, either on their own initiative or at others’ requests (i.e., mandatory dress codes). But they also enjoy their skill, strength, achievement, and pride, countering bad feelings with good ones derived from sports. Given the ability to walk the balance beam, so to speak, between cultural femininity and masculinity, do we even have a problem? In one way, no; this photo of Jayne Appel (photo of collegiate basketball player in French braids, with pink nail polish and taunted muscles, fiercely ripping a ball away from her opponent) indicates that some athletes feel comfortable performing a full-spectrum of gendered behaviors/looks. But in another way, yes. Because being seen as more masculine than “normal” women remains an area of discomfort and struggle for athletes. It is in line with my own worry, when called a man, that something is wrong with me. In sports, women often thrive as active, physical, coordinated, and competent athletic beings—POWERFUL; and this has potential, for all of us, to carry over into other realms of our lives. And yet the simple act of designating women’s looks or actions as “like a guy,” “masculine,” or “dykey” plants seeds of self-doubt that impede us as we grow into our selves.

Some Closing Implications: It’s All Greek To Me

One approach to challenging these judgments would be to erase gender distinctions entirely, creating a world of competitive sports *without* separate events for women and men. On the other hand, there are good reasons to keep the two categories, preserving space for women to develop as athletes in the shared company of women, especially given a history of disadvantage. However, the disquieting consequence of this choice is that we still operate on the assumption that there are inherently different, biologically natural groups we call Female and Male. Without the mutually exclusive, agreed upon categories of F and M, gender attribution could not occur. Because it requires rules: first) that there are two, and only two, categories; and second) that some signs mark individuals as female, others as male.

It is as if the world was one big Greek system, and everyone suddenly had access to a sorority or fraternity—on one condition. We MUST rush, with the consolation that no one gets turned away. After rush, individual chapters might then form with distinguishing characteristics and differing status. The “man’s man” chapter ranks higher than the “90-pound weakling” chapter. Among sorority chapters, white often tops brown, and one of the lowest ranked groups is “masculine” women, including many athletes. Today’s women athletes might find fame and fortune, but still too often are denigrated as gender outliers, high jacking the qualities of fraternal manhood over to sorority row.¹⁰

We might counter that gender lies along a continuum, one visible *among* women athletes who themselves sport a variety of gendered presentations. Extend this to everyone and there is a continuum from the girliest girl to the manliest man, a sexy

hulk who never cries. And why would he? He wins the competition for the primary cultural genital! But, in fact, the continuum doesn't hold up. Because there are still only two boxes: F and M. For women told that they resemble men, not their sororal sisters, there is often a sense of injury.

That sense of injury is even greater when, like Caster Semenya, one is told that while there are only two boxes, you don't fit into either and are thus some kind of freak. Ridiculed, humiliated, and pathologized, Semenya withdrew from the public, refusing to speak to anyone for most of a year. Responding to a reporter's probe, she replied, "I can't talk to anyone. I can't say to anyone how I feel or what's in my mind. . . Now I just have to walk away. That's all I can do. . . maybe forever" (Levy, 2009, p. 59). She has since returned to competition, but under circumstances equally pathologizing. The IAAF and IOC have now stated that athletes who identify as female but are labeled with DSD can compete as women, but only if they have their "disorders diagnosed and treated" (Kolata, 2010).

In this world our connections to other human beings are forged through a sense of belonging—to a family, a team, a group of friends, a political affiliation, a gender. When the foundational principle of social organization remains a binary system, with only two boxes to check, M or F, required on every form and figure, the feeling of not belonging can still hurt. I would never have given up playing football with the boys on my block, but neither could I stop the hurt when kids teased me. This should be the distant past. That women athletes still feel these wounds 40 years later, despite the fantastic opportunities afforded them, is sadly disturbing.

I don't have any solutions, only questions. As we make our world partially through sports, we create new meanings. We also create new groups of "us," making a "we" that enables us to feel comfortable and proud. But as we create a sense of belonging we need to ask ourselves, "to what or whom do we belong?" What group have I joined and does my "us" create an ostracized "them"—for instance, a Black South African woman whose chromosomes or hormonal balance might make her atypical? Or a proudly queer athlete who does not object to the label lesbian but only to the fact that it is uttered in contempt? Do we want a world in which there are *two* and *only two* boxes?¹¹

This is the fundamental contradiction of feminism *and* of women's sports. We work to erase false distinctions that limit our freedom. But to organize for change, or to compete in the most supportive environment, we count on foundational categories to remain stable, so we *have* a women's ski team, basketball tournament, or rowing championship. And a women's movement. This remains one source of our identity even though we might want to erode the categorical distinctions that prop it up. In my nephew Jake's confusion, he got one thing right; he understood the absoluteness of sexual difference in today's world. "Aunt Susan is a man." What are you? More importantly, what would we like to be?

Notes

1. For a comparison of Semenya and Baartman, see Ray (2009).
2. Google search (December 17, 2010).
3. Some figures, however, are shown in "unisex" pants and tops that cover genitals or torso.
4. The single condition that elicited "very uncertain" scores from the test-takers was the figure

with a penis and four female cues: half said male, the other half female, and no one was sure. When a figure with a penis and three female characteristics was labeled “male,” the selectors were still fairly certain they got it right.

5. But in a context that included multiple ‘female’ cues, participants said breasts were the determining factor.

6. In 1988 sociologist Don Sabo cited his finding that 94% of active and committed adult female athletes disagreed with the statement: “Participation in sports diminishes a woman’s femininity.” However, 57% did agree that, “In this society, a woman is forced to choose between being an athlete and being feminine” (Sabo, 2007, p. 67). Although this study is over twenty years old, a number of recent studies of high school and college athletes revealed similar findings. See for example Krane, et al., (2007); Shakib and Dunbar, (2002); and Adams, et al., (2005).

7. Excluded from being “regular girls,” they redefined the terms, seeming to take some pride in being “known as the jock girls, not the sorority prissy girls” (Kauer and Krane, p. 47).

8. Significantly, she recovered her self-esteem through sports, adding, “Well I don’t really care that I don’t have big boobs, I can still throw a ball way harder than you can (laughs)” (Krane, et al., 90).

9. In this construction, normal equals feminine equals socially acceptable. Being bigger, more physically assertive and muscular led to feelings not simply of difference but of being unacceptable, or abnormal, which in turn drew them to practices designed to create an “alternate identity from athlete—that of a feminine woman” (Krane, et al., 93).

10. Outliers do best when they form their own mini-chapters, joining other athletes who share some of the same values, skills, and musculature. Like those before them, they can fight whatever stigma they feel through sports itself, which fuels identities imbued with a sense of toughness, confidence, and achievement.

11. For a different, nonpathologizing approach to gender categories, see the recent policy report by Pat Griffin and Helen J. Carroll, “On the Team: Equal Opportunity for Transgender Student Athletes.” Report Issued (October 4, 2010). Though it deals with transgender—not intersex—athletes, it offers a set of best practices that will open up sporting opportunities to those of any sex and gender, subverting the two-sex system even as it manages to operate within the existing framework.

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