



Olympic Gold Medalist Stella Walsh (left) in 1933. Hulton/Archive.

## Sports: Transgender Issues

by Carolyn Kraus

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Any mention of transgendered athletes evokes for most people the story of tennis star Dr. Renee Richards.

Born Richard Raskind, Richards legally became a female and began competing in women's tennis at age 43, after hormone replacement therapy and sex reassignment surgery. She attracted world-wide attention in 1976 when she sought exemption from the Barr-body gender-verification test, adopted by the International Olympic Committee and other sports organizations in the late 1960s to prevent athletes with male musculature from competing as females.

Richards eventually won the case and competed as a woman in the 1977 United States Open Tennis Championship, establishing a legal precedent for transgendered athletes but by no means ending a tangled and emotionally charged historical controversy.

The term "transgendered" applies to people who have changed their apparent identities, either by undergoing sex-altering procedures, including hormone treatment and genital surgery, or by simply choosing to live as the opposite gender.

In athletics the issues of transgendered people are intertwined with those of people born "intersexed"--that is, their sexual identities are not clear-cut because of ambiguous genitalia or other congenital conditions.

Even for postoperative male-to-female transgendered athletes such as Renee Richards, the Barr-body chromosome test poses a problem: chromosomal analysis still identifies them as male, whereas physical appearance and psychological identification designates them as female.

When Judge Ascione of the Supreme Court of New York ruled in Richards' favor in 1977, he argued that, whereas the Barr-body test "appears to be a recognized and acceptable tool for determining sex," Richards' circumstances warranted consideration of other factors.

"When an individual such as plaintiff, a successful physician, a husband and father, finds it necessary for his own mental sanity to undergo a sex reassignment," Ascione wrote, "the unfounded fears and misconceptions of defendants must give way to the overwhelming medical evidence that this person is now a female."

### Fears and Misconceptions

The modern history of competitive women's sports offers up a number of fears and misconceptions that bear on the Richards case and on transgendered and intersexed athletes in general.

Addressing the fear that transgendered athletes might gain advantage over their genetically female competitors, Judge Ascione argued that the Richards case represented an anomaly and not a serious threat to women's athletics, for "there are very few biological males, who are accomplished tennis players, who are also either preoperative or postoperative transsexuals."

But beyond the unfounded fear that transgendered athletes might monopolize women's sports lie a host of attendant anxieties.

Perhaps the most deep-seated is the fear that women's athletics might erode traditional femininity. The global sports world registered this concern at least three decades before the institution of sex testing and long before the Renee Richards case.

In the early 1930s, when Mildred "Babe" Didrikson, the greatest woman athlete of modern times, set world records in the woman's 80-meter hurdles and javelin throw, reporters continually remarked on her masculine appearance, and the press focused on the Olympic medalist in a campaign to restore femininity to athletics.

The controversy finally ended when Didrikson married, started wearing dresses, and turned from competing in track, basketball, baseball, football, and boxing, to setting records in the more acceptably feminine world of golf.

### **Masquerading**

Further complicating the landscape for transgendered athletes is the fear that men masquerading as women might invade and dominate women's sports. Gender fraud has frequently been confused with the issues of transgendered and intersexed athletes whose struggles to be allowed to compete are only one piece of a profound and genuine struggle for identity.

No clear-cut case of masquerading has ever been documented, but fraud has frequently been suspected, particularly during the Cold War era when athletic success was used to promote not only national prestige but also political systems.

When sex testing was first introduced in 1966, several Eastern Bloc shot-putters and discus-throwers suddenly disappeared from women's sport. These included the Soviet Union's Press sisters: Tamara, who held the shot-put record from 1959 to 1965, and her sister Irena, a hurdler and pentathlete. Their masculine appearances, combined with their disappearance, fueled speculation about both steroid use and gender fraud.

Another instance, widely cited as an example of masquerading, actually raises the poignant dilemma of the intersexed athlete. German high jumper Dora Ratjen competed in the 1936 Berlin Olympics but was barred from further competition in 1938, when she was examined and discovered to have ambiguous genitalia. After the war, Ratjen, by then living as Hermann, acknowledged that the Nazi Youth Movement had forced him to compete as a woman.

Even after the advent of chromosomal testing, some athletes accused of impersonating women were, like Ratjen, apparently either intersexed or victims of chromosome abnormalities. "There was a naïve assumption that everyone who was a female athlete but was genetically male, was an impostor," notes Joe Leigh Simpson.

Other critics cite the case of Spanish hurdler María Martínez Patino, who failed a gender test in 1985 and was banned from sports, though she was later reinstated. Before submitting to the chromosome test, Patino knew nothing of the birth defect that had left her with male chromosomes and without a uterus.

### **Transgendered Athletes**

An early Olympics gender controversy involved Czech runner Zdenka Koubkova, who broke the women's world record for the 800-meter dash at the Commonwealth Games in London in 1934. Chromosomal testing

was far in the future, but a pre-Olympics genital evaluation some years later failed to establish Koubkova as unambiguously female.

She was not only stripped of her award and barred from participating in the Olympics, but also subjected to public humiliation when a photograph of her hermaphroditic state was published in a medical book. At about that same time, Koubkova, who had been raised as a girl, began living her life as a man.

In Berlin in 1936, another call for clinical examination of an international athlete arose when United States runner Helen Stephens won an Olympic gold medal for the 100-meter sprint.

When Stephens beat Stella Walsh, a Polish-American sprinter competing for Poland, by 1.8 meters, a Polish journalist accused Stephens of being a man. (Accounts of the controversy emphasize that Stephens had once been propositioned by Adolph Hitler.) An examination eventually established that Stephens was female.

But sixty years after losing to Stephens, it was Stella Walsh who was revealed to be transgendered. Walsh had been the 1932 Olympic 100-meter sprint champion and the first woman to break the twelve-second barrier. She had won two gold medals, set eleven world records, and won forty-one Amateur Athletic Union titles.

In 1980 Walsh was shot dead while witnessing a robbery in Cleveland. The autopsy revealed that the athlete who had lived her life as a woman had the genitals of a man.

Prominent athletes who had sex-change surgery after they had competed include two French track stars, Clair (later Pierre) Bresolles and Lea (later Léon) Caula. Both won silver medals for a relay race in the 1946 track and field European Championships; both later underwent genital surgery and lived as men.

At least one athlete, Erika Schinegger of Austria, has competed in both men's and women's Olympic events. As a member of the Austrian National Ski Team, Schinegger won the 1966 women's downhill ski title; but shortly thereafter, when the Barr-body test was introduced, she was found to be chromosomally male and barred from further women's competitions.

After undergoing four genital surgeries, she changed her name to Eric, married a woman, fathered a child, and competed in cycling and skiing as a male.

Although transgendered athletes are frequently challenged or disqualified by athletic unions, a new understanding may be emerging. For example, Australian golfer Mianne Bagger qualified for the Ladies' European Tour when organizers amended their rules in 2004 to permit post-operative transsexuals to compete.

### **Sex Testing**

Throughout the 1990s, a chorus of geneticists and physicians challenged the Barr-body test, as well as a new and easier sex-typing procedure that replaced it at the 1992 Winter Olympics in France.

Although the new test was "easy enough to be done by a technician using a prepared kit," Christopher Anderson wrote in the scientific journal *Nature*, the very ease with which the test can be conducted "risks widespread sex testing in the absence of a clear idea of what the results actually mean."

Although challenges to chromosomal testing focused not on discrimination against transgendered athletes but on the gender verification tests' inability to distinguish between chromosome abnormalities and birth defects, such scientific concerns evoke the dilemma that transgendered and intersexed athletes face.

Although Renee Richards and others might conceivably enjoy some competitive advantage, "It is also true," notes editor of *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine* Dr. Jean Wilson, "that people are not equal in athletic prowess in regard to height, weight, coordination, or any other parameters, and it follows that this is just another way in which athletes would not be equal."

In 2000, the International Olympic Committee quietly dropped sex testing. As our understanding of human genetics advances, and as more transgendered and intersexed people tell the stories of their struggles, it becomes increasingly obvious that traditional notions of gender are inadequate and discriminatory.

"It is important that all society, including sports organizations, recognize that gender development is not always clear cut," Wilson writes. "The only appropriate way to assign these people to one or the other sex is to allow them to choose for themselves."

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