

#HandsOffCaster: Why the Policing of Female Athletes' Testosterone Levels Needs to Stop

by Jules Boykoff^[1]

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Caster Semenya at the 2010 Memorial Van Damme in Belgium. Photo by Erik van Leeuwen^[2].

It's a sad fact that gender policing of women athletes is as much a part of Olympic tradition as the torch-lighting ceremony. "Sex tests" have a long and ignoble history in Olympic sport^[3]; sports governing bodies have used everything from physical examinations to chromosomal testing to determine women's eligibility. Testosterone levels are their screen du jour. At the 2016 Rio Games, two women runners—Dutee Chand of India and Caster Semenya of South Africa—are experiencing baseless scrutiny^[4] because they have hyperandrogenism, which means they have higher than typical testosterone levels for women. While the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) argue that this gives the athletes an unfair advantage, there's no evidence showing that women with higher natural testosterone levels have a significant competitive advantage over women with lower levels. Instead, the specious questioning of the athletes has more to do with old-school conceptions of gender and the rigid orthodoxy of Olympic sport.

To untangle the political thicket of so-called sex testing, who better to turn to than Katrina Karkazis^[5]? Karkazis is a senior research scholar at the Center for Biomedical Ethics^[6] at Stanford University. Her research on "sex testing" policies, which has been funded by the National Science Foundation, has appeared in *Science*^[7] and *The BMJ*, and she's written essays for outlets

like the *New York Times*^[8] and the *Guardian*^[9]. She also served as an expert witness in Chand's case. A 2016 Guggenheim Fellow, she is at work on a new book with Rebecca Jordan-Young, *T: The Unauthorized Biography* (Harvard University Press), that explores the many scientific and social identities of testosterone in high stakes domains like sport.



Researcher Katrina Karkazis

First, what is hyperandrogenism and how has it become part of discussions around Olympic sport?

Hyperandrogenism is a medical term describing women who have higher than typical testosterone levels. These women are not doping or cheating; this has never been a point of contention. Nevertheless, in 2011 and 2012, the IAAF and the IOC introduced regulations under the false assumption that women with naturally high testosterone have an “unfair advantage” over women with lower levels. Policymakers set a ceiling for women’s natural testosterone —or “T”—requiring them to lower their testosterone via drugs or surgery or else quit sport.

These interventions carry side effects that can be debilitating to an athlete^[10], so complying also means giving up one’s career. It’s a choice of no choice.

IAAF medical experts revealed^[11]—unethically—that they performed medically unnecessary surgery on four young women from “rural or mountainous regions of developing countries” to lower their T so that they could remain eligible. Alarming, they also performed clitoral reduction surgery. Others quit rather than undergo these invasive interventions.

The IAAF and IOC have said the T policy is not “sex testing,” but you say it is. Can you explain?

So-called sex testing policies have been around for decades and are aimed at controlling sex and policing who can legitimately compete as a woman. All of the policies, which rely on an individual criterion—for example, chromosomes—to determine women’s eligibility, have been based on the faulty assumption that any singular marker of sex is adequate to classify people as male or female. Because no one sex marker is definitive, the policies have always unfairly excluded some women.

Sports governing bodies have said they abandoned sex testing in the 1990s. But they clung to a reserve clause allowing them to investigate any woman they deem “suspicious.” They investigated Caster Semenya^[12] [in 2009] during the period the policies were “abandoned.”

Despite the scientific-sounding rationale about competitive advantage, only the screening criterion has changed; it’s now testosterone levels. Unlike chromosomes, T levels can be manipulated, and so for the first time women are required—effectively coerced—to change their bodies to maintain eligibility, consequently “violat[ing] ethical standards of clinical practice and constitut[ing] a biomedical violence^[13].” Policymakers nevertheless characterize the regulation as “progressive.”^[14]

The hyperandrogenism regulation was suspended in 2015. How did that happen?

This is where Dutee Chand comes in. Chand, an Indian sprinter, was banned from competition in 2014 under the IAAF regulation^[15]. She and many others considered it blatantly unfair and made a courageous choice to challenge it, saying^[16], “I won’t undergo surgery or any other procedure. At every level of my life... have competed the way I am. I’ve been told the hormonal issue with me is natural so that’s why we have decided this.”

In 2015, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS)—the world’s highest sport court—suspended the hyperandrogenism regulation, saying there was insufficient evidence that the performance advantage caused by hyperandrogenism was substantial enough to warrant discriminating against women with high T. The IAAF has even acknowledged that there is a lack of direct evidence^[17] on T and performance in elite women athletes; IOC policymakers have said women with naturally high T^[18] “have no more competitive advantage than other elite athletes with favorable genetic characteristics.” CAS gave the IAAF two years to present evidence of the magnitude of performance advantage. Over one year after the CAS decision was released, they’ve yet to do so.



A Nike South Africa^[19] ad featuring Caster Semenya.

We're also hearing a lot about Caster Semenya^[20], a South African runner. How is her situation different from Chand's?

Where her situation really differs is the extent to which she is being bullied in the media. Semenya is favored to win the 800 meter, and the media and others are really lashing out at her. The IAAF cleared Semenya to run in 2010. CAS said over a year ago that the scientific evidence is insufficient to support the T regulation. Yet journalists, often prompted by others^[21], are trying her in the media, sloppily proffering their speculations about her spectacular athleticism as evidence of some kind of unfair advantage, conveniently failing to note that Chand—who allegedly has similar advantages to Semenya—did not advance in her sole race at Rio^[22]. Although effort is subjective, they point to the apparent ease with which Semenya races as further proof of her supposed advantage. When Usain Bolt seems not to be exerting himself (“jogging”), his superior athleticism is credited. When Semenya’s performance comes across as elegant and painless, she is unfairly benefitting from her own biology. This is nothing more than “sportsplaining,” making science a casualty of ideologies about gender and testosterone. And it’s poor sportsmanship.

This treatment isn’t limited to Semenya; the regulation is suspended, but that hasn’t stopped people affiliated with the IAAF from recklessly and sensationally speculating about an “all intersex podium,”^[23] showing callous disregard for these women’s humanity. Journalists are amplifying the speculation^[24]. This is irresponsible, harmful, and dangerous. It’s nasty speculation like this that led to Chand and Semenya being investigated in the first place. That we even know [these] athletes’ names is precisely because of leaks, even by those affiliated with the IAAF. An IAAF spokesman publicly confirmed the investigation into Semenya prior^[25] to the women’s 800-meter final at the Berlin World Championships, fueling headlines around the world.

Critics assert that these policies create de facto witch hunts. What's going on here?

The hyperandrogenism policies make clear that they are after gender nonconforming women. The IAAF claims “the individuals concerned often display masculine traits and have an uncommon athletic capacity in relation to their fellow female competitors,”^[26] and the IOC urges National Olympic Committees “to actively investigate any perceived deviation in sex characteristics.”^[27]

Just pause to think how messed up and harmful this is.

Who is deemed suspicious is read through a white heteronormative gaze and its expectations regarding what bodies and gender expression are “appropriate,” or even valorized. Inhabiting a body outside these expectations means having a body that is always, to some extent, treated as public and open to scrutiny, probing, and coercion in ways invisible to the institutions and individuals doing the looking.

The shift to T further intensifies the focus on bodies because people think they can read the signs of T on the body. When you put this together with long-standing racialized ideas about which women have high T, it explains the heightened scrutiny of women of color. World-record-holding marathoner Paula Radcliffe demonstrated the interlocking assumptions driving the targeting of women from the Global South in a recent interview^[28]. She said that when “we fully expect no other result than Caster Semenya” winning at the Olympics, “then it’s no longer sport.” Blind to the politics of her privilege, and her own dominance, she said she feared that people would go to “certain villages in South Africa” where she claimed hyperandrogenism is more prevalent and “seek out girls who look like they’re going to be able to go out and perform and to run fast.” Following Radcliffe’s offensively racist “warnings,” thousands of South Africans rose to Semenya’s defense and immediately started a petition^[29] calling for the harassment to stop.

And the results are devastating, not just the trauma of the interventions but the psychological violence of telling women they aren’t allowed to compete as women despite having lived and competed as women their whole lives. This is what happened to Semenya and Chand, among others. As one person observed on Twitter: “I know Caster Semenya is a woman because people are trying to control her body.”^[30]

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How would you characterize media coverage of athletes like Caster Semenya and Dutee Chand?

It’s horrible. Now that Semenya is excelling, a bullying campaign has been unleashed. The hashtag #HandsOffCaster^[33] is now trending in response to recent articles in *Sports Illustrated*^[34] and the *New Yorker*^[35]. I have never seen an athlete who has done nothing wrong be so scrutinized. The IAAF should be vigorously defending its athletes. Instead, on the eve of their races, it announced that it will try to start limiting testosterone again^[36].

Semenya’s participation is described using the noxious language of the battlefield: She’s a “ticking time bomb,”^[37] her participation a “minefield.”^[38] The relentless comments include the media’s and public’s willingness to scrutinize these athletes’ bodies, question their identity, and invade their privacy with impunity. Such representations invite unwelcome speculation about the configuration of these athletes’ genitals, whether they have ovaries or testes, and whether their chromosomes are XX or XY. Too many have made assumptions about their hormone levels based on their judgments [on] how they look and how they perform, questioning whether they should be allowed to compete or even be considered women at all. One journalist disturbingly called women subject to investigation “uncategorised”^[39]—a declaration indicative of the kind of privilege that comes from having a body or gender presentation that escapes such scrutiny.

Whereas Semenya is being tried in the media, other women athletes are respected and celebrated for excelling. Gymnast Aly Raisman said of her teammate^[40] Simone Biles: “All the girls are like, ‘Simone’s just in her own league. Whoever gets second

place, that's the winner.” *The New York Times* proclaimed that with swimmer Katie Ledecky, “The question isn't whether she'll win, but by how much,” and she is done swimming well before anyone and no one is crying unfair. (Although someone did say Ledecky swims “like a man^[41],” showing sexism is alive and well in women's sport.^[42])



Dutee Chand getting ready for the opening ceremony at the Rio games. Photo via her Twitter feed.^[43]

Some say that not having a “sex testing” policy would be the end of women's sport. What do you say to that?

To the extremely vocal and largely male contingent of clarions of the gender apocalypse I say: “Calm down.” One policymaker essentially threw up his hands and said we might as well start mixing genders for competitions.^[44] These hyperbolic concerns about the end of sport as we know it are a gender panic. The regulation is suspended and sport looks the same as it always has: women competing against women.

Many of these discontents claim that their aim is to “protect” women's sport, and by extension, women themselves. Efforts to protect women have long been a cloak for paternalism and gender discrimination; they are based on cultural ideologies of women as innately vulnerable and in need of protection. What are they protecting women's sport from? Women breaking women's records? What does pose a threat to women's sport is the twisted framing that a regulation that discriminates against and harms women is “good for women.”

When a man's unusually high T level is found to be natural, questions end there. But for women, even when their T is natural, they face further investigation. If we care about gender equity, women would be treated as men currently are: case closed.

What about the argument that the regulation protects a small minority of women at the expense of the majority of female athletes?

Yeah, sorry, but the interest of the majority does not automatically trump the rights of a minority group. Countries around the world have bills of rights precisely to protect and advance the rights and status of women, Black [people], religious minorities, and LGBT folks, among others. The Olympic Charter and the constitutions of international federations serve as athlete bills of rights. CAS was absolutely clear that the regulation discriminates against women and infringes on the rights of a minority

group. The extreme potential harm that the regulation can cause to the women targeted outweighs any perceived benefit, especially given the lack of scientific evidence for the regulation.

Any final thoughts?

This tweet^[45] captured exactly how I feel about both athletes: “I hope Caster Semenya wins. I hope she wins everything. Even the golf.”

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Links

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