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The XY Games

By Jennifer Finney Boylan

Belgrade Lakes, Me.—In the 1936 Olympic Games, the sprinter Stella Walsh — running for Poland and known as the fastest woman in the world — was beaten by Helen Stephens of St. Louis, who set a world record by running 100 meters in 11.4 seconds. After the race, a Polish journalist protested that Stephens must be a man. After all, no woman in the world could run that fast.

Olympic officials performed a “sex test” on Stephens, who was found, in fact, to be female, proving once and for all that a person could be incredibly fast and female at the same time.

Forty-four years later, Walsh, who had become an American citizen, was shot to death in the parking lot of a discount store in Cleveland. Her autopsy revealed a surprise: It was Stella Walsh, and not Helen Stephens, who turned out to have been male all along, at least according to the Cuyahoga County Coroner’s office.

Last week, the organizers of the Beijing Olympics announced that they had set up a “gender determination lab” to test female athletes suspected of being male. “Experts” at the lab will evaluate athletes based on their physical appearance and take blood samples to test hormones, genes and chromosomes.

On the surface, it seems reasonable for there to be some sort of system by which Olympians can be certain that female medalists really are female. The problem is that China’s tests are likely to produce the wrong answers, because they measure maleness and femaleness by the wrong yardsticks, and in the process ruin the lives of the innocent.

It would be nice to live in a world in which maleness and femaleness were firm and unwavering poles. People can be forgiven for wanting to live in a world as simple as this, a place in which something as basic as gender didn’t shift unsettlingly beneath our feet.

But gender is malleable and elusive, and we need to become comfortable with this fact, rather than afraid of it.

At the original Olympic Games, no gender testing was considered necessary. Back in 776 B.C., the Games were for men only, and they were conducted in the nude (with female spectators prohibited).

The modern era of gender testing began in 1968, at the Games in Mexico City, when it was believed that Communist countries in Eastern Europe were using male athletes in women's competitions. (The truth was that some of the Eastern European athletes had been on a regimen of testosterone and steroids, giving them the physiques of young Arnold Schwarzeneggers.)

The test, which began as a crude physical inspection, has become more sophisticated over the years. In the 1970s and '80s, the test was performed by a buccal smear — the scraping of cells from the inside of the mouth — and the sample studied for chromosomal material.

Over the past 40 years, dozens of female athletes tested in this manner have tested "positively" for maleness. That's because these tests don't measure "maleness" or "femaleness." They measure — and not always reliably — the presence of a Y chromosome, or Y chromosomal material, which no small number of females have.

The condition, known as androgen insensitivity, occurs in about 1 in 20,000 individuals. Basically, a woman may have a Y chromosome, but her body does not respond to the genetic information that it contains. Some women with androgen insensitivity live their lives unaware that they have it. By any measure, though (except the measure of the Olympic test), they are women.

In 1996, eight female athletes at the Atlanta Games tested positively. Seven of these women were found to have some degree of androgen insensitivity, and one an enzyme defect. All were subsequently allowed to return to competition.

Ten years later, however, Santhi Soundarajan, a runner from India, was stripped of her silver medal in the 800 meters at the Asian Games for "failing" a sex test. An Indian athletics official told The Associated Press that Soundarajan had "abnormal

chromosomes.” She was ridiculed in the press, and her career was destroyed. In the wake of her global humiliation, she attempted suicide.

You might think that gender testing at the Olympics is conducted to weed out transsexual women, who might be perceived to have some sort of physical advantage over natal females. Yet this is not the case. Since 2004, the International Olympic Committee has allowed transsexuals to compete as long as they have had sex-reassignment surgery and have gone through a minimum of two years of post-operative hormone replacement therapy. (As for the advantages that people born male supposedly have in competing against people born female, the combination of surgery and hormones appears to eliminate it entirely. Studies show that postoperative transsexual women perform at or near the baseline for female athletes in general.)

In the four years since the ruling, there have been no transsexuals — or at least no athletes who are open about it — in Olympic competition. But this year, Kristen Worley, a Canadian cyclist, came close to qualifying. If transgender athletes are now allowed to compete officially, and if gender testing has been shown frequently to render false results, then what exactly are the Chinese authorities testing for?

The Olympic hosts seem to want to impose a binary order upon the messy continuum of gender. They are searching for concreteness and certainty in a world that contains neither.

Most efforts to rigidly quantify the sexes are bound to fail. For every supposedly unmovable gender marker, there is an exception. There are women with androgen insensitivity, who have Y chromosomes. There are women who have had hysterectomies, women who cannot become pregnant, women who hate makeup, women whose object of affection is other women.

So what makes someone female then? If it's not chromosomes, or a uterus, or the ability to get pregnant, or femininity, or being attracted to men, then what is it, and how can you possibly test for it?

The only dependable test for gender is the truth of a person's life, the lives we live each day. Surely the best judge of a person's gender is not a degrading, questionable examination. The best judge of a person's gender is what lies within her, or his, heart.

How do we test for the gender of the heart, then? How do we avoid out-and-out frauds, like Hermann Ratjen, who said he was forced by the Nazis to compete as "Dora" in the 1936 high jump? (He lost, finishing fourth.)

A quick look at the reality of an athlete's life ought to settle the question. Ratjen was male not because of what was in his genes, but because of who he was. He returned to his life as Hermann after the Berlin Games. "For three years I lived the life of a girl," he said in 1957. "It was most dull."

It's hard to imagine a case like Ratjen's recurring today, but if it did and he slipped through the cracks, then so be it. Surely policy for the Olympics — and civilization — shouldn't be based on one improbable stunt perpetrated by Nazi Germany.

Which brings us back to Stella Walsh. While the autopsy revealed that she had male sex organs, a chromosome test ordered by the coroner was more ambiguous. She may well have had androgen insensitivity or some other intersex condition. More important, she spent the whole of her life as a woman. She should be celebrated for her accomplishments as an athlete, not turned into an asterisk because of a condition beyond her control.

The triumphant fact of a life lived as a woman made Walsh female, and the inexact measurements performed by strangers cannot render her life untrue.

Maybe this means that Olympic officials have to learn to live with ambiguity, and make peace with a world in which things are not always quantifiable and clear.

That, if you ask me, would be a good thing, not just for Olympians, but for us all.

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