

San Francisco Chronicle

Olympics' Transgender Quandary

Debate rages on the fairness of new inclusion rule

By Rona Marech, Chronicle Staff Writer

Monday, June 14, 2004



Alyn Libman's figure-skating coach always used to say she skated like a boy. Over the course of a promising competitive career, Libman received the same message over and over -- she should tone down her aggressive style.

But Libman didn't want to change her style. Instead, she changed her gender.

Libman, 19, has taken male hormones since 2002 and now identifies as a male -- and he still skates. In the fall, the UC Berkeley sophomore plans to join the school's figure-skating club team. He's received permission from U.S. Figure Skating, the sport's governing body, to compete against other men.

As transgender people gradually gain acceptance, the sporting world has had to confront a tricky issue: How to include transgender athletes without creating a playing field that's not level.

Last month, the International Olympic Committee enacted a policy on transsexuals before an elite athlete could force the question. The committee said transgender athletes could compete in the Olympics if they met certain requirements, such as completing genital reconstructive surgery and at least two years of hormonal therapy. The IOC also requires that "legal recognition of their assigned sex has been conferred by the appropriate official authorities," such as by a nation's courts.

The committee's medical director, Patrick Schamasch, said the policy was designed "more to protect the athlete who has not been sex reassigned than to help the person who is." If an athlete follows the new rules, he said, "we are almost sure that the advantage of the previous gender will have completely disappeared."

Helen Carroll, coordinator of the Homophobia in Sports Project at the National Center for Lesbian Rights, praised the decision as "a precedent that really embodies a sincere attempt to be fair to all athletes."

But some athletes, coaches and sports lovers angrily disagree that that policy is fair or a civil rights achievement. Some question whether transgender men can be equally competitive in competition, but the controversy has mostly centered around whether male-to-female athletes will have an unfair edge.

The concern is that transgender women, having gone through male puberty, could have bigger bodies, denser bones and greater lung and heart capacity than their competition.

"It's the biggest insult to women and everything we've gone through," said Pat Connolly, a coach and former runner and pentathlete who participated in the 1960, '64 and '68 Olympics. "Gradually over the years, (the Olympics) started adding events for women. Why? To give women an opportunity to compete. ... Because there's an essential difference between men and women. Any dummy on the street knows the difference."

Dr. Lori Kohler, an assistant clinical professor at UCSF who has treated transgender patients for a decade, brushed aside those worries, saying transsexuals' bodies change sufficiently to justify allowing them to compete. Most changes are the result of hormone therapy, which primarily affects muscle mass, she said.

Men who become women lose much of their muscle mass, while women who become men tend to develop muscles more easily than they used to. In either case, skeletal structure doesn't change much, Kohler said.

Mianne Bagger, a transsexual female golfer from Australia who has played professionally in her home country and Europe, said in an e-mail, "I can understand people's concerns. ... The best that can happen is that people who have the opportunity can come and watch me play to compare my game with the other girls."

Some transsexuals say their athletic prowess is compromised as they adjust to new bodies and possibly new centers of gravity. It's difficult to measure because the changes happen gradually, much like going through puberty, Bagger said.

"One day you realize that you maybe can't lift something that you once could," she said. "For me, I know I don't hit the ball as far as I used to."

But medical experts say research on the effects of hormone treatment on transgender people is far from exhaustive. What would happen if someone with basketball superstar Kobe Bryant's build, for example, started taking female hormones?

"I don't know," said Dr. Robin Dea, a psychiatrist at Northern California Kaiser Permanente who has treated transsexuals for 25 years. "We don't have a study available of male-to-female transsexuals who have gone on hormones and maintained a world-class training regimen."

Exactly the point, critics say.

"The big part of the story is that there's no research whatsoever," Connolly said. "What little evidence they have is not on athletic performance."

Opponents of the new Olympic policy on transsexuals also say allowing some athletes to take hormones during a crackdown on performance-enhancing steroids is confusing. But Schamasch, the Olympic committee medical director, said transsexuals won't interfere with efforts to root out illegal drug users because they will be tested like everyone else for normal hormone levels.

"They're completely different issues," said Shannon Minter, legal director at National Center for Lesbian Rights.

Minter and other advocates point out that athletic competition is inherently unfair, given that people are not endowed with equal physiques, drive or economic status.

"To say that a genetic man or woman is different than a transgender man or woman is impossible, because then you're saying that taller women are at an advantage so they shouldn't compete," said Kohler of UCSF.

If the policy is inequitable, it's only because it doesn't go far enough, several transgender activists said.

"Why would genital surgery make (a female-to-male athlete) a more fair contender?" Loren Cameron, a transgender activist and bodybuilder, asked in an e-mail. Hormone therapy is what affects athletic competition, not genital surgery, he said.

Many transgender men opt not to have the surgery because it's complicated, imperfect and expensive. "This policy is unjustly prohibitive to any (transgender male) competitor," Cameron said.

Nonetheless, he praised the Olympic committee's new policy as an important step that will have a ripple effect in the world of sports. Most experts agree, though few expect transsexual athletes to flood the Olympic Games or other sporting events.

"As much as I like to think I'll be able to just go and play golf, the added focus of the media attention adds extra pressure," said Bagger, the Australian golfer.

Libman, who cut his hair into a Mohawk after completing his freshman year finals, once had Olympic figure-skating aspirations. That was back when he skated at 5 a.m. five days a week, and the sport offered him a retreat from the harassment he faced in high school.

Reaching an elite level is out of the question now, although he's unsure how much his competitive slippage has to do with his gender transition and how much has to do with injuries he suffered in a mountain biking accident.

Since starting hormone therapy, Libman said, he's grown much stronger. His jumps are higher and more "explosive," he has more endurance, and he puts on muscle almost effortlessly.

The International Olympic Committee's new policy "validates the fact that I exist, that transgender athletes exist, and we're people," he said. "And we should have the right to compete in the Olympics if we're good enough as athletes."

©San Francisco Chronicle