

The Feminine Mystique: The Interpretation of “Femininity” in an Athletic Context and the Impact of this Interpretation on Sex and Drug Testing for Female Athletes.

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Following on the heels of Christine Jorgenson’s widely acclaimed sex-change operation, several medalists from the 1946 European track and field championships were revealed to be hermaphrodites, possessing characteristics of both sexes. These disclosures, along with growing concerns about the “masculinity” of many Soviet-bloc female champions, eventually forced the international athletic community to reassess its policy of simply requiring a “femininity letter” from the home country as sufficient evidence for participation in women’s events. Thus it was that at the 1966 European Track and Field Championships in Budapest, the first official “sex tests” were introduced—a visual examination of the external genitalia performed by a team of gynecologists.

This unpopular test was replaced in 1967 with a chromosome screen, done by taking a small sample of skin or hair. The chromosome test, however, has become a matter of considerable controversy within athletic, medical and feminist communities. Though the IOC has maintained its support of the test, most medical experts point out that there are several other components of sexual identity which should also be analyzed: external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, hormonal levels, psychosexual attitudes and the socially assigned sex.

Following the development of the first anabolic steroid, methandrosthenolone, in 1958, sport governing bodies were faced with the development of a new set of drug testing procedures to ensure fair competition. Officially banned in 1968 by the IOC, steroid testing was done for the first time at the Montreal Olympics in 1976.

While sport administrators see their mission as establishing sex and drug testing protocols to ensure that women athletes are competing on a level playing field, some feminists see in these testing procedures further evidence of the patriarchal nature of modern sport. These scholars argue that most sport governing bodies are still rooted in the sorts of nineteenth-century medical and aesthetic interpretations of femininity which equate womanly muscularity with masculinity and sexual deviance. However, such arguments fail to take into account the groundswell of requests for drug testing which came from women athletes during the 1970s when track and field athletes, swimmers, bodybuilders, powerlifters and several other women’s sporting groups lobbied vigorously for testing programs previously denied to them by their male-dominated national governing bodies.