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CENTRE FOR SPORT POLICY STUDIES

## CENTRE FOR SPORT POLICY STUDIES RESEARCH REPORTS

# SEX TESTING, NAKED INSPECTIONS and the OLYMPIC GAMES:

## A CORRECTION TO *The London 2012 Olympics: A Gender Equality Audit*

Peter Donnelly  
University of Toronto

Michele K. Donnelly  
University of Southern California

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**Research Report Editor:**

Peter Donnelly (Director, Centre for Sport Policy Studies)

[peter.donnelly@utoronto.ca](mailto:peter.donnelly@utoronto.ca)

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**Centre for Sport Policy Studies**

Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education

55 Harbord Street

Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2W6

[www.sportpolicystudies.ca](http://www.sportpolicystudies.ca)

## **Summary**

In a research Report on gender equality at the London 2012 Olympics, we made an incidental statement about sex testing in the form of naked inspections of women athletes at Olympic Games in the 1960s. In stating this, we were following in the footsteps of numerous academics and journalists who had made a similar assertion. The Report was generally received favourably, including by Anita DeFrantz, a senior member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and chair of the IOC Women and Sports Commission since 1995. However, she pointed out that there was no evidence that naked inspections were carried out at Olympic Games. We accepted Ms. DeFrantz's challenge and, following additional research and consultations, discovered that she is correct. Naked inspections were carried out in the 1960s by the international track and field federation (IAAF), and at other multi-sport events such as the Commonwealth Games and the PanAmerican Games, but not at Olympic Games. We have corrected the original Report, and we are grateful to Ms. DeFrantz for drawing our attention to the error; we have taken this opportunity to set the record straight. However, our original critique of sex testing as yet another humiliating aspect of sport for women athletes still stands, and the International Olympic Committee are by no means innocent in this process.

## **Résumé**

Dans un Rapport de recherche portant sur l'égalité des genres aux Jeux Olympiques de Londres 2012, nous avons fait une déclaration fortuite concernant le contrôle des sexes sous la forme d'inspection à nu des athlètes féminins aux Jeux Olympiques dans les années 60. Ainsi, nous nous sommes placés dans la lignée de nombreux chercheurs universitaires et journalistes ayant fait une affirmation semblable. Dans l'ensemble le Rapport avait reçu une réponse favorable, incluant celle de Madame Anita DeFrantz, membre sénior sur le Comité International Olympique (CIO) et siégeant sur la Commission Femme et Sport du CIO depuis 1995. Cependant, celle-ci a indiqué qu'il n'y avait aucune preuve que des inspections à nu furent effectuées. Nous avons alors relevé le défi lancé par Madame DeFrantz et, suite à des recherches et consultations supplémentaires, il a été prouvé que nos affirmations étaient véridiques. En effet, des inspections à nu ont été effectuées dans les années 60 par la Fédération Internationale d'Athlétisme (IAAF) ainsi que lors d'autres événements multi-sportifs, entre autres, les Jeux du Commonwealth et les Jeux PanAméricains, mais jamais aux Jeux Olympiques. A cet effet, nous avons modifié le Rapport original tout en étant très reconnaissant envers Madame DeFrantz de nous avoir indiqué cette erreur; nous avons d'ailleurs profité de cette opportunité pour remettre les pendules à l'heure. Par ailleurs, reste intacte notre critique originale à l'effet que le contrôle des sexes chez les athlètes féminins constitue toujours un aspect humiliant du sport chez les femmes, et le Comité International Olympique n'est pas du tout innocent à cet égard.

## The Challenge

In April this year, the Centre for Sport Policy Studies at the University of Toronto released a research Report: [\*The London 2012 Olympics: A Gender Equality Audit\*](#).<sup>1</sup>

In an incidental statement relating to gender inequality, but not directly related to the subject of the research *Report*, we wrote the following with regard to sex testing:

In the 1960s women at Olympic Games were obliged to undertake “peek and poke parades” – naked inspection by a panel of (usually) male physicians. No imposters were ever identified, but some women were excluded who did not “look” feminine enough to those judging them. Protests by athletes led to the “parades” being dropped in 1968, to be followed by the introduction of a chromosome test to ensure that women athletes have the requisite XX sex chromosome. Despite the fact that this test was widely discredited in the scientific community, it was not dropped until shortly before the Sydney 2000 Olympics (p. 14).

We received favourable comments about our *Report* from – among others – Anita DeFrantz, a senior member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and chair of the IOC Women and Sports Commission since 1995. However, Ms. DeFrantz pointed out “one serious error” in the report, noting that she had:

never seen or heard any primary evidence that [naked parades] happened at an Olympic Games. This story about naked parades at Olympic Games... is one of those myths that writers keep repeating without checking primary sources. The IOC implemented gender testing (or femininity testing as they called [it]) for the first time at the 1968 Grenoble Olympic Winter Games and at the Mexico City Olympic Games (personal communication, received 17 May, 2013).

## The Evidence

We have taken Ms. DeFrantz’s challenge to heart, and have checked our facts with a number of scholars, several of whom have consulted the primary sources. They provide support for Ms. DeFrantz’s position. Ian Ritchie notes:

In 1966, the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) required athletes to undergo a physical inspection by three female gynecologists at the European Championships in Track and Field [Budapest, Hungary]... In the same year, a pelvic examination was required for athletes entered in the Commonwealth Games in [Kingston] Jamaica. At the European Cup Track and Field events in 1967, the IAAF added chromosome testing to the visual inspection (2003, p. 87).

Simpson, et al. (2000) also report that “physical inspection was made of disrobed female athletes” at the 1966 European Track and Field Championships and the 1967 Pan American Games in Winnipeg [Canada] (see also Puffer, 1996); and that “gynecologic examinations were performed” at the 1966 Commonwealth Games (p. 1568).

Cassandra Wells, a doctoral candidate at the University of British Columbia who has been researching this issue in the IOC archives in Lausanne, is fairly sure that:

...the only hard evidence for the naked parades came from IAAF-sponsored events like the World Championships and the Commonwealth Games. [I]n the IOC archives [I] only found reference to lab-based testing. That said, the IOC was certainly “in” on the IAAF plans and was watching them carefully. There was overlap in their medical advisors (there still is) and femininity testing was regularly on the agenda of IOC meetings of that time (personal communication, 17 May, 2013).

Bruce Kidd reports that several scholarly papers on sex testing were presented at the annual meeting of the North American Society for Sport History (Halifax, NS, CANADA, 24-27 May, 2013): “[t]he consensus is that the visual parades were limited to IAAF events in 1966 and 1967 before the chromosome test was introduced in late 1967” (personal communication, 26 May, 2013).

### **A Correction**

Writing about another aspect of sex testing in sport, science blogger Vanessa Heggie made the following point with regard to *confirmation bias*:

Sex and gender identities are deeply personal, private matters, and are hard to investigate. When it comes to sex testing, writers tend not to study original sources or dig around in archives, but rely on existing, recently published material. This isn't an unusual way to write, but if no one is double-checking with the original material, mistakes can “go viral” and are repeated until they are accepted as facts (Heggie, 2012).

We are guilty of confirmation bias in this case, of following others in helping to propagate this particular mistake and we are grateful to Ms. DeFrantz for drawing this mistake to our attention. We have corrected our original *Report*, and the corrected version may be found on the [Centre for Sport Policy Studies website](#). It now seems evident that naked examinations of women athletes were conducted primarily by the IAAF at track and field events in 1966 and 1967, and that there were also similar examinations at multi-sport events such as the Commonwealth Games and the Pan American Games; we have found no evidence that naked examinations were conducted at Olympic Games at that time.

However, our original critique of sex testing as yet another humiliating aspect of sport for women athletes still stands. And the IOC is by no means innocent in this process. It has been widely reported that a sex test was carried out as early as the 1936 Berlin Olympics where American sprinter Helen Stephens “was accused of being a man when she narrowly beat the favourite, Polish runner Stanisława Walasiewicz. Stephens underwent an unspecified test and was declared a woman by the Berlin authorities, taking gold” (Heggie, 2010, p. 158). And Simpson, et al. (1993) note that, “beginning at the Rome Olympics in 1960, the... IAAF began establishing rules of eligibility for women athletes” (p. 305).

The minuted records indicate that the IOC was well aware of the IAAF’s actions in conducting naked inspections, and the IOC must also have become aware, along with the IAAF, that such examinations were deeply unpopular with women athletes. Ian Ritchie (2003) cites an article by Gail Vines (1992) in the *New Scientist* in which she quotes 1960s British track star Mary Peters referring to the naked examination as a “grope,” and “the most crude and degrading experience of my life.” It is now common in the scientific and medical literatures to refer to the humiliating aspects of the naked inspections; for example: “private humiliation” (Reeser, 2005, p. 696); women “were subjected to traumatic and degrading visual genital inspections” (Ljungqvist, et al., 2006, p. 225); physical examinations were “widely resented” (Simpson, et al., 1993, p. 305); and “[c]omplaints and resentment about this embarrassing approach led the IOC to search for an alternative gender verification method at its competitions” (Simpson, et al., 2000, p. 1568).

After less than two years of naked examinations, the IAAF added chromosome testing to the examinations at the 1967 European Cup Track and Field Championships, and the IOC and other major games and international federations adopted chromosome testing (referred to by the IOC as “femininity testing”) in 1968. Again, there were serious criticisms of the chromosome tests from both women athletes and the medical and scientific communities – but the IOC continued such tests for the next 30 years. The decision to discontinue the tests was made in 1998, when the critical outcry became too great to continue the tests at the Sydney 2000 Olympics.

The remainder of our comment on sex testing is correct. The IOC, without publicity, permitted medical staff to take blood samples from women athletes at the 2008 Beijing Olympics – the samples were tested for androgen levels as a new approach to sex testing. The IAAF was again complicit, through its humiliating treatment of Mokgadi Caster Semenya following the 2009 World Track and Field Championships. Androgen testing continues, with women athletes again required to prove that they have achieved an approved level of “femininity.”<sup>2</sup> To date, the lack of transparency about the process of “gender,” “sex,” or “femininity” testing has been consistently for the benefit of the organization, and evidently not for the benefit (or privacy) of the athletes involved. Rather, it is often the athletes who are likely to be exposed while the process itself remains hidden. Just as sport leadership was out of date with regard to genetic information about sex differences between the 1970s and 1990s, it

now appears to be out of date with regard to the nature of androgen testing as it relates to sex differences (see, for example, Karzakis and Jordan-Young, 2013).

Thank you again to Ms. Anita DeFrantz for prompting us to set the record straight.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to our colleagues who willingly gave their time and expertise this summer to help us to correct our reproduction of a longstanding error: Cheryl Cooky, Shari Dworkin, Bruce Kidd, Ian Ritchie, and Cassandra Wells; additional assistance was provided by Susan Cayleff, Patricia Vertinsky, and Eric Vilain. We are indebted to Stephanie Seymour and Jean Harvey for their assistance in translating the Summary. As we stated in our original *Report*, we are very grateful for the helpful contributions of our colleagues; however, we are responsible for the content and interpretations made in this *Correction* and the *Report* to which it relates.

## Notes

1. The original version of the *Report* is no longer posted on the CSPA website. As outlined in this document, a corrected version is now available.
2. Although we have referred to androgen testing and concerns about hyperandrogenism as a new form of “sex testing,” recent comments are beginning to suggest that “the new policy is not about proving sex” (Sanchez, Martinez-Patiño and Vilain, 2013, p. 113). However, this appears to be semantics, since the IOC regulations now state:

A female recognised in law should be eligible to compete in female competitions provided that she has androgen levels below the male range (as shown by the serum concentration of testosterone) or, if within the male range, she has an androgen resistance such that she derives no competitive advantage from such levels (International Olympic Committee, 2011).

Thus, while male and female biological characteristics overlap in numerous ways, women are not eligible to compete “in female competitions” if their androgen levels are in the “male range.” Men are not subject to similar testing, so it seems that the new tests **are** concerned with approved levels of “femininity.”

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