

Is Competitive Elite Sport Really Morally Corrupt?

Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that competitive elite sport both a) reduces the humanity of athletes by turning them into beings whose sole value is determined in relation to others, and b) is motivated by a celebration of the genetically superior and humiliation of the weak. This paper argues that while a) is a morally reproachable attitude to competition, it is not what competitive elite sport revolves around, and that b) simply is not the essence of competitive elite sport. Competitive elite sport is an exploration of the physical and mental demands of sport. Finally, the paper explores a number of consequences of the different views of sport with respect to the problem of intersexual women.

KEYWORDS

sport, competition, intersexual women, genetic superiority, humiliation of the weak, celebration of the strong

Introduction

Everyone agrees on the benefits of moderate exercise, but controversy surrounding the physical and/or moral benefits of *elite* sport remains. The opposition to elite sport is to some extent concerned with the physical effects of the extreme training and lifestyle of elite athletes, for instance, the loss of menstruation in women because of extremely reduced body fat, which can increase the risk of osteoporosis later in life (Warren 1999). However, the opposition to elite sport is perhaps more often grounded in moral concerns about the competitive element (see Kohn 1992). Should human society really endorse, even encourage, the kind of fierce competitiveness that we see in elite sport, as well as its idolization of winners? Does elite sport perhaps only serve to increase the inequalities of human society and propagate a culture that admires winners and despises losers?

I will ignore moral concerns about the lying and cheating that occurs in sport, as this is a phenomenon we find everywhere, even in academia. Instead, I will focus on two interrelated concerns about the very essence of competitive elite sport (henceforth *CES*):

- a) the worry that CES is essentially morally corruptive of those that participate, and
- b) CES revolves around a morally blameworthy celebration of the genetically superior, and a contempt for the weak.

We find versions of these worries in the works of Kohn (e.g. 1992), and they are discussed in Simon (2012) and Kretchmar (2012) as well. However, I will focus on a recent debate between Swedish philosophers

that appeared in Issue 3 of the journal *Sans* in 2012. My reasons for addressing this particular debate is that it focuses on individual sport while others tend to focus on team sport, and because the criticism put forward in this debate is interestingly extreme; it is not only argued that CES *can lead to* morally blameworthy behaviour or personality traits, but that it is *essentially* corrupt in itself. This particular debate therefore serves as an interesting case study that I think adds a novel perspective to the more general issue. I will argue that the critics do not present a convincing case for the claim that CES is morally corrupt, partly because they take for granted that competition is the sole *raison d'être* of CES, but also because they take for granted a flawed view about the nature and purpose of competition.

The debate

The debate consists of four essays, three of which have been published in a special issue on sport in the Swedish journal *Sans* (Issue 3, 2012), and a fourth that appears as a critical commentary to the three papers in an online discussion forum on the publisher's website (Johansson & Hjelm 2012). In the journal essays, Lena Andersson, Torbjörn Tännsjö, and Claudio Tamburini, respectively, argue that CES is morally corrupt, while Ingvar Johansson and Johnny Hjelm deny this suggestion in their critical commentary.

Andersson argues that CES reduces the humanity of individual athletes; they become beings that measure their own value, and that of others, solely in terms of their competitive success (Andersson 2012). Tännsjö criticizes CES as a social ideal, arguing that it is based on the same kind of celebration of the genetically superior and contempt for weakness that suffused the ideology of the Nazis (Tännsjö 2012). Harsh words indeed, but the purpose is surely to provoke debate. It is in light of the presumed purpose of CES to celebrate the strong and humiliate the weak that Tamburini finds the treatment of intersexual women by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) to be paradoxical and therefore unintelligible (Tamburini 2012). Furthermore, Tamburini suggests that CES, especially its segregation into strata of male and female sport (superior/inferior strata), is a threat to democracy and equality, not least to the equality of the sexes.

Ingvar Johansson and Jonny Hjelm (2012) defend CES. First, they point out that Andersson's critique is based on her own personal negative experience of CES, and that it cannot be generalized to all athletes and therefore cannot establish that CES reduces the humanity of all athletes across the board. Second, they argue that Tännsjö and Tamburini misunderstand the purpose of segregation in sport. Sexual segregation is only one of many because they misunderstand the purpose of competition.

In their view, it is not the case that sport is segregated into male and female sport just because it is acknowledged that there are two genetic pools involved and that we need to separate them to be able to identify the superior in each gene pool. The division into male and female, professional, and amateur sport, as well as various divisions into classes depending on age or handicap, has nothing to do with genetic superiority, but rather the creation of competitive situations with uncertain outcomes by pitting approximate equals against one another. Based on this view, segregation into groups of approximate equals is necessary for turning the activity into a challenge in which winning is appreciated as an achievement, regardless of the participants' absolute level of ability. A similar view of competition has also been expressed by Mumford and Anjum (2014).

Johansson and Hjelm's suggestion can explain why the paraplegic women's 100m dash can be just as exciting as the standard 100 m dash for athletes and spectators alike, why it is equally rewarding for the athletes to train for and participate in the event, and why we find the victory of the underdog so much more rewarding than the victory of the obvious favorite. Indeed, the underdog's victory is typically perceived as the better achievement by far, and therefore all the more admired; even if the underdog does not win, they are sometimes celebrated more than the winner if their performance is perceived as a greater achievement despite the loss. To take one recent example, the success of the Icelandic men's football team in the 2016 European finals has perhaps been hailed more than the performance of the winning team, Portugal. For Iceland to make the quarter finals by beating England was beyond anyone's expectations, but Portugal was a favourite all along; thus, a

Portuguese victory in the tournament was only to be expected. Indeed, nobody took Iceland's 2-5 defeat to France in the quarter finals to be humiliating in any way at all.

In brief, competition in this view is not about crowning the genetically superior human; it is about creating opportunities for as many as possible to experience the satisfaction of taking on a challenge and achieving something. If anything, this should be regarded as democratic rather than anti-democratic. Others have pointed to similar values of sport as a source of feelings of achievement or excellence (Weiss 1969; McNamee 2008; Simon 2010).

As for Tännsjö's view that elite sport is an expression of contempt for weakness, Johansson and Hjelm simply deny that admiration of the winner implies contempt for the loser. Indeed, the underdog argument also works in this case. Obviously, if the genetically *inferior* wins, they will be admired. I take this to be the point of all of the films about Rocky Balboa. But even if the underdog loses while giving the favorite a match, the loser is also celebrated and admired as a great achiever. The same point holds for all achievements in sport, even those that are not the result of competition. For instance, it is a much greater challenge and therefore a greater achievement for the comedian Eddie Izzard to run 43 marathons in 51 days than for the legendary Haile Gebreselassie to do so. Consequently, we admire Eddie more than we ever would admire Haile if he were to do something like that, even though Haile is clearly the better athlete, and even if he completed each marathon in half the time Eddie did.

I agree with Johansson and Hjelm, but think there is more to say. To begin, even though I disagree with Andersson about the essence of CES, I think she is on to something important. I think she has identified a morally blameworthy *attitude* towards competition that diminishes individuals and the sport when it is present, but I do not think this is an attitude that represents the essence of CES.

Second, although I agree with Johansson and Hjelm that the purpose of CES is *not* to crown the genetically superior human, I do not think they have completely captured everything there is to say about its essence. Indeed, I think Andersson puts her finger on what is missing when she describes the essence of sport in general - as opposed to CES - as an exploration of one's own ability to master the physical and mental demands of the sport. I think that is exactly what drives elite athletes more than anything.

Someone who pushes their own boundaries and develops some degree of mastery of a sport, whether or not they ever win a competition, earns everyone's admiration and respect, but most of all earns their own respect as a capable individual. I think Andersson is wrong to think that CES ruins the individual's exploration of his or her own abilities. It is in competition that one really pushes one's own boundaries, especially when it is done in situations where approximate equals are pitted against one another and the outcome is uncertain. And the prospects of partaking in a competition provide motivation for pushing boundaries in training: it does not matter if the goal is to win, to be among the top 10, top 100, or simply to get to the finish, as is often the goal in long-distance events. The situation is not so different in academia. I am sure the prospects of getting a paper published, one that would stand its own ground in the debate, was what motivated Andersson, Tännsjö, and Tamburrini to put in a good effort to produce their papers.

Attitude towards competition among individuals

Andersson initially characterizes CES as an evil in itself. However, as her essay progresses, the focus narrows down to a specific *attitude* towards competition. According to her, competition/competitiveness should “*never be central in a person's life if that life is to be rich [because] when the element of competition takes over one has made one's value and meaning dependent on others* [my translation from Swedish, RI]” (Andersson 2012). According to her, then, a person should never be driven *solely* by comparison with others but instead by an exploration of the physical and mental demands of the sport in question. I totally agree on the latter, but find that this is perfectly compatible with CES. In fact, I believe the element of competition is a crucial part of the exploration of the demands of the sport. In team sport this is self-evident. Football is essentially a game whose purpose is for adversary teams to try to defeat each other by scoring goals and preventing the other team from scoring. It is not possible for an individual or team to explore the physical and mental demands of the sport *without ever engaging in a match*. By segregating teams into groups of

approximate equals, the exploration of the physical and mental demands of the sport is made more interesting and fun for everyone.

Andersson's focus, however, is not on team sport but individual sport. Her background is in cross-country skiing, an extreme form of individual endurance sport, and her arguments are all backed up by anecdotes from that background. Admittedly, it is less self-evident that you must compete in order to fully explore the physical and mental demands of cross-country skiing. However, having the same background myself - I competed in the 1992 and 1994 Winter Olympics - I doubt that one can properly push oneself to the limit outside a competitive situation of some sort. There has to be something at stake to motivate someone to push themselves to the limit and above; at least it helps enormously if there is something at stake. This does not necessarily require other people. The motivation would be there, say, if your life depended on getting across the desert before dehydration and death. But to go out onto the track and push yourself to the limit for 90 km, as is the case in the Vasaloppet race, without anyone to compete against and no one to scrutinize and/or appreciate your achievement is going to be very difficult.

One must also consider that there are no records to beat in cross-country skiing which could serve as a measure of how far an athlete has pushed his or her abilities. Every racecourse is different, and each time you ski the snow is a little bit different, so there is simply no way for you to tell whether you have become faster except by comparison with how others manage the course on a given day. Thus coming four seconds *after* the Italian skier Maurillio de Zolt in the 10k race in the 1992 Olympics, and in 59th place out of 110 skiers, was a great achievement for me because de Zolt had previously won medals at World events, and indeed won the silver in the 50k a week later.

To my mind, competition can be an element in the exploration of one's own boundaries, but *winning* competitions should not be, and need not be, the *sole* purpose of practicing the sport, or of someone's life. It is possible that there are individuals who find no other purpose in life, but this does not mean that the sport they participate in is intrinsically corrupt; it is the person that is corrupt, and there is no obvious reason to blame the nature of the sport for this.

One can complain that sport organizations and/or clubs sometimes develop a culture in which the wrong kind of attitude dominates (some of Andersson's complaints go in this direction), but one can then argue that the organization is corrupt, and not the sport itself.

Personally, I have not met many individuals (maybe none) whose sole purpose of participating in CES was to be better than anyone else. Indeed, the few I suspect may have had an attitude like that did not survive in the sport long enough to become very good at it. They were good as youngsters but dropped out when they really had to train hard to keep abreast. Now, I suppose some athletes might *think* of themselves as only being motivated by the honor of winning, simply because winning is very important to them, even though in reality they would never have been able to put themselves through the training if they did not *also* love the sport for its own sake. It really does help the competitive athlete enormously to do something they really love doing for its own sake. It would take an enormous mental effort to devote oneself for at least a decade to doing something one does not really like merely to become the best at that sport. For a cross-country skier, this may involve up to 900 hours per year of lung-bursting exercise for 10 years in order to even have a chance at an Olympic medal.

As I have said, I have never known a top-level skier who did not enjoy the physical activity for its own sake, although many would probably have felt a lot of that enjoyment disappear - at least the enjoyment of competing in the sport - if they were suddenly convinced that they did not have a chance of ever winning anything.

The CES that Andersson dislikes is one that revolves solely around competition, but I cannot see that this attitude dominates the attitudes of athletes in general, nor does it dominate the attitudes of the spectators. On the contrary, those who participate in sport only because they love winning tend to quit the instant winning becomes hard, or when the burden of training exceeds their lust for winning. Obviously, my argument is also anecdotal to some extent, but the point is not to show that CES *cannot* be about winning, only that it *can* also be about something else, and thus can be pursued without loss of humanity even if competition is involved.

One can speculate whether Andersson had the bad luck of being a winner from the start. If winning initially comes easy, then winning can establish itself as the main incentive for participating in the sport, especially when this is reinforced by feedback from the organization one is part of. I myself started relatively late with cross-country skiing (at 13), and thus initially started as a loser. I came last in every competition for two years. But the sport was such good fun that I persisted and ended up a national champion in my age group four years later. This was in Iceland. When I moved to Sweden I was last again, but it did not matter because I continuously experienced individual progress and the sport was still as fun as ever.

Just as athletes who have the wrong attitude towards competition exist, leaders within the sport movement who have the wrong attitude also exist: leaders who think that the sole purpose of sport is to win competitions and acquire fame. I think we should worry more about this side of sport than the attitude of athletes. These leaders treat athletes as nothing more than potential winners (or losers), i.e., as those that either can or cannot serve the winning ambitions of the leaders on behalf of the club. Think of those clubs whose sole purpose appears to be to develop the “winning team” and therefore begin to segregate its members according to “winning potential” at a very early age, or even exclude those who do not meet the leadership’s criteria for what counts as a potential winner. What they are effectively doing is taking it upon themselves to decide who gets to push their boundaries and develop as athletes; they do at least decide who is allowed to pursue that goal within their organization. According to leaders of that sort, the athletes exist for the club, not vice versa. There is a genuine moral dilemma for the sport movement here, but it is not about the essence of the sport itself; it is about cultivating the right attitude towards the sport and competition.

I am sure there are individuals in any sport with an unhealthy focus on winning, but this does not imply that competition is in itself wrong or, in other words, that it is an activity that *essentially* diminishes the humanity of the participants. It is the *attitude* that winning is the sole purpose of training and competition that diminishes a person, not least because those who have this attitude tend to despise losers (including themselves, when they lose), and that is not a praiseworthy trait.

Elite sport as a celebration of genetic superiority

According to Tännsjö, the Olympic Games - considered as a historical phenomenon - reveal that the purpose of CES is to identify the genetically superior athlete. In his view, the competition between athletes is secondary to the search for whoever “*runs faster or jumps higher than anyone has ever done before* [my translation, RI]” (Tännsjö 2012). The Games are in other words a continuous search for the genetically superior, and not really about the mutual competition among athletes. The ambition to make the Games as fair as possible is not to give everyone an equal chance to win, but to turn the Games into a continuous controlled experiment in which each athlete is tested against fixed variables to allow for historical comparisons. Tännsjö thinks that this explains the fixation on world records: they represent the outputs of the historical search for the genetically superior.

Now, it is perfectly correct that there is something fascinating about world records, but does the hypothesis stand up to the scrutiny that they are *all there is* to CES? Perhaps they are all there is for those who have no interest in sport themselves. This would at least explain the widespread obsession with the 100m dash. It is short enough that even the uninterested can bear to watch to see if it ends in a record. On the other hand, you do need to be devoted to the sport to watch a two-hour marathon to see who wins, not to mention watching a four-hour long broadcast of the 90k Vasaloppet. Nearly two million people viewed the broadcast of the race in 2015. Incidentally, there are no world records in cross-country skiing, or, more importantly, in team sport either - arguably the most popular form of sport around. So how does this square with the suggestion that elite sport is about nothing more than crowning the genetically superior? It seems to me that the great majority of elite sports have no prospects at all of being able to do that.

Tännsjö further argues that the Olympic amateur ideal stresses natural talent before training, which puts an even stronger emphasis on the celebration of genes than the motto “faster, higher, stronger.” Admittedly, the initial spirit of the modern games was strongly influenced by the values of the European aristocracy, in particular those related to the importance of good breeding. A gentleman should be a good athlete by birth and not by training. However, to identify this ideal with today’s Olympic movement or the search for genetic

superiority is far-fetched. To begin with, the ideal gentleman was not the one who jumped highest or longest or ran fastest, but who was rather good all-round, and on top of that exhibited a balanced soul, all in accordance with the motto "*mens sana in corpore sano*." To think you were the best or to seek to be the best would have been seen as a vice and not a virtue. Furthermore, especially in the early days, it was of particular importance to be able to win and lose with dignity. These are ideals of character that are difficult to square with the essence of elite sport as envisaged by Tännsjö.

Anyway, the motto "faster, higher, stronger" can just as well be interpreted as an expression of the individual's exploration of his or her own boundaries; you strive to run faster, jump higher, and be stronger than *you* ever have before, not necessarily faster, higher, or stronger than anyone else. Indeed, any other interpretation runs counter to the other famous saying associated with the spirit of the games: what is important is not to win, but to take part. If Tännsjö were right, the motto would be "fastest, highest, strongest," and that the important thing is not to take part but to win.

Competitive elite sport and paradox

In their criticism of Tamburini, Johansson and Hjelm focus on the claim that CES is a threat to democracy and equality because it stresses the segregation of genetically different groups, and I will not add anything to their discussion about that. I will focus on Tamburini's criticism of how the IAAF has reacted to the problem of intersexual women, especially in the wake of South-African athlete Caster Semenya's rise to fame in the 1500 m and 800m. Caster improved her times from mediocre to nearly all-time best in a year, which fuelled suspicion either of doping or of actually being a man. The latter suspicion had to do with what was perceived as her very masculine appearance. Ultimately she was required to submit to a sex test whose results have never been made official; what followed was that the IAAF imposed a rule that women with unusually high testosterone levels would have to submit to hormonal treatment to lower those levels if they wanted to compete. For a period, Caster was therefore excluded from competitions since she did not want to undergo hormonal treatment. The Court of Arbitration for Sport later revoked the rule until such time as the IAAF could prove that heightened testosterone levels actually provide an advantage.

Tamburini's paper, published before the ruling of Court of Arbitration for Sport, argues that not only is the suggestion that intersexual women either be excluded from the sport or forced to submit to oestrogen treatment morally corrupt, but it also contradicts the very idea he surmises CES to be built upon: to identify and celebrate the genetically superior. Tamburini's argument goes as follows:

- a) the purpose of CES is to identify and reward the genetically superior,
- b) intersexual women are genetically superior and should be rewarded, but
- c) they are instead punished for their genetic superiority.

The conclusion is meant to be that CES is involved in some kind of paradox that undermines its own existence. In my view, Tamburini is wrong about the purpose of CES, and therefore I find the argument unconvincing. This in turn does not imply that I think it is right to either exclude individuals from sport or make them subject to hormonal treatment. I think we do have a moral dilemma, even if we accept Johansson and Hjelm's view that the purpose of CES is to create situations with an uncertain outcome by pitting approximate equals against one another. From that perspective, and assuming that intersexual women actually are superior (we will have reason to discuss that further), this means there is no longer a group of approximate equals competing with an uncertain outcome. What to do?

What to do?

Let me first summarize what I have argued in the previous sections. I have argued that the purpose of sport in general is to explore the physical and mental requirements of a sport, which is something that does not necessarily involve competition, but competitions do help in pushing boundaries. So, elite sport can be treated as an extreme form of the exploration of the sport. However, I have also accepted that the purpose of competition is to create situations with an uncertain outcome by pitting approximate equals against one another. That way, winning becomes an achievement to be proud of, and that is why competitions serve to

push individuals in their exploration of the physical and mental demands of the sport. Thus, from the perspective of the athlete, CES has two purposes:

- a) to explore the physical and mental requirements of the sport and
- b) to test oneself against approximate equals under conditions with uncertain outcomes.

The two can be separated such that some individuals only see competition as a means for exploring the sport, while others see the exploration of the demands of the sport as a means to win competitions, but I have argued that both kinds of individual will be at a disadvantage. The ideal is a combination.

The idea that intersexual women have an innate physical advantage over other athletes is a problem in this context. Observe that the argument is entirely hypothetical because we do not know for certain that they really have an advantage. The experts disagree. The initiators of the controversial IAAF rule that would have barred intersexual women from competition in the women's category unless they agreed to submit to hormonal "correction" argue that the evidence shows that intersexual women have much higher levels of testosterone under resting conditions (Ritzén et al. 2015), while the opponents claim that there is no difference in testosterone levels following competition (Healy et al. 2014). In addition, there is controversy over what advantage intersexual women may possibly have even if they have higher levels of testosterone.

An answer to these questions therefore depends on further empirical research. Here I can only investigate the consequences of assuming that there is an advantage in comparison to assuming there is none. We can make quick work of the latter. If intersexual women do not have an advantage, then we can carry on as usual. As the situation is today, the Court of Arbitration for Sports has ruled that it is the IAAF that must medically prove that intersexual women have an advantage before they can introduce any regulations about it. Intersexual women are therefore no longer excluded from competition.

However, if research were to show that intersexual women do have higher levels of testosterone and that this is in fact a significant advantage, then we have a problem. The problem is that we no longer have a situation where approximate equals are competing with an uncertain outcome. If there were a larger population of intersexual women, it might be possible to create a separate class for them. But this is not the case so what to do instead? Exclude them on the same grounds that men are excluded from competing with women? This would be to exclude them from competing altogether. To require intersexual women to submit to oestrogen treatment could then be regarded as a way of allowing them to compete rather than excluding them.

However, I agree with Tamburrini that it is morally questionable to offer anyone the option of undergoing chemical treatment to "correct" how they are by nature. The parallel to how homosexuals have been made to undergo hormonal treatment to "correct" their alleged deviation from nature is too close for comfort. But what would be an alternative appropriate course of action if the option is neither to create a separate class, exclude, or "correct" the inequality, therefore leading to a situation where there are not approximate equals pitted together with an uncertain outcome?

It seems there are two options. One is that we have an event where the athletes only strive to explore the physical and mental requirements of the sport without comparison to others. They would simply try to best their own previous personal records. According to Andersson, this would be a good thing. Alternatively, the athletes would come to regard the competition as a two-in-one affair. On the one hand, this is Caster exploring her own potential against the clock. On the other, we have the rest of the group exploring their potential *and* competing against each other for second place in the race.

From the perspective of everyone other than the genetically superior, this is unsatisfactory, at least given that the attention is still on the winner and not on the runner up. This would only remind everyone of their inferiority and take away the recognition they feel they deserve. On the other hand, they would still be able to explore the physical and mental requirements of the sport.

Now, one can wonder what the situation would be if the two-in-one character of the event were openly accepted and recognized by everyone: by the athletes, the organization, and the spectators alike. I would suggest that this would mean, on the one hand, that the genetically superior would no longer be bestowed any recognition for winning, either by themselves or by others. They would only be given recognition for setting new records. On the other hand, the runner up would gain recognition for having bested the rest of the pack, and so be recognized as the real winner of the competition. However, the presence of the superior would

undeniably cast a shadow on the event, just as it would if a male athlete were to take part in every female event just to show how much better he was.

From the perspective of the genetically superior, they would have to ask what is in it for them if they know they are genetically superior. Well, they would be able to continue their pursuit of trying to master the physical demands of the sport, but they would not really be pushed by their competitors, and winning would no longer be all that big of an achievement. Consequently, they would no longer have all that much of an incentive to participate in competition.

In a state of ignorance

Can anything interesting be said about the case while we still are in a state of ignorance about the alleged superiority of intersexual women? Well, one can argue that other athletes should see the presence of someone like Caster Semenya as a blessing and not a curse, at least as long as she remains beatable. I know it is frustrating to compete with someone so obviously gifted, but that is exactly the point; there is nothing that can push an athlete more efficiently to explore all of the demands of a sport than to attempt to best his or her superior. It demands that they try to compensate for the lack of natural talent with more and better training than they would otherwise need.

In fact, looking back on the history of competitive sport, it would seem that the great majority of all athletes in all sports have been in a situation where they were attempting to best a dominant figure that was regarded as having (rightly or wrongly) a natural gift that gave them an advantage over others. The Finnish skier Eero Mantyranta turned out to have a genetic mutation that increased the levels of hemoglobin in his blood by 50%, and yet he was not unbeatable. Today, long distance runners face the challenge of beating East African runners, and speculations run wild contemplating which innate advantage these African runners have. One suggestion has been that they have very thin lower legs and small feet, which makes a measurable difference in the amount of work a runner has to do to keep a certain pace; they have to shift a smaller mass in every step (Larsen & Sheel 2015). The advantage can be biomechanically measured, but no one has yet suggested that we add extra weight to the shoes of those with small feet to even out the difference.

It has occurred to me that athletes simply have to accept that intersexuality is one of many innate physiological traits that may give an athlete an advantage. They may have to live with the realization that many or most of their fellow competitors are likely to have some such advantage (and that they might even have one themselves). This does not make anyone unbeatable, but it does mean that everyone has to work harder on something in order to best the rest. What I am saying is that participants in competitive sports will have to get rid of the illusion that, with a few extreme exceptions, they are all genetic equals. In fact, it is this genetic heterogeneity, to a degree, that makes competition interesting in the first place. In that context, the uproar over intersexual women may be a storm in a water glass, especially when we are in a state of ignorance as to the size of that advantage in comparison to other advantages one can have. Consider the advantage that height gives in sports such as the high jump and basketball. No one has ever suggested, as far as I know, that adjustments be made to make these sports equally accessible to everyone regardless of height.

Do all athletes go through the same training regimen?

We have yet to examine one last argument put forward by both Tännsjö and Tamburini. They argue that the purpose of sport must be to identify the genetically superior, as nowadays genetics are the only thing that can make an athlete stand out - because they all supposedly train in the same way. This, I am afraid, is an argument that only reveals Tännsjö and Tamburini's ignorance of the situation. It is not the case that all athletes train in the same way or with the same frequency.

First of all, the argument presupposes that we now know everything there is to know about the physiology of exercise, and that consequently we should also know the most efficient training regimens. Unfortunately, the current status of our knowledge of exercise physiology does not exceed that of our general knowledge of physiology; for example, our knowledge of cancer is admittedly incomplete. The situation is made all the more difficult because each person is physiologically unique and responds differently to training.

That is, even if we knew everything there was to know about physiology, athletes would still train differently. However, we do not know everything, and consequently there are plenty of “philosophies” about the best way to train. The situation is still very much trial and error.

Here is an example to illustrate the variation in training regimens: the quantity of training for cross-country skiers competing in the World Cup ranges between 675 and 1,000 hours per year. This is a massive difference in terms of quantity, not to mention the difference in the ratios between low, medium, and high intensity training, how much of it is carried out on snow, and how much is strength training. The difference is simply enormous.

Every year there is some story about a unique training method that was responsible for the previous year’s success. The Swedish skier Gunde Svan ran up sandy dunes pulling a car tire for extra resistance, Per Elofsson ran for hours in the swamps around his hometown Umeå, Magdalena Forsberg survived whatever tortures the demon trainer Pichler came up with, and Marit Bjørgen does sessions in the gym that would have been unimaginable just five years ago. Once these athletes became champions, everyone assumed that their body constitution and genes must have been ideal for the sport, all the while being completely ignorant of what those genes were and what kind of training they had suffered through. Consider the fact that Maurice Greene, at 176 cm and 75 kg, was for a long time considered the ideal for the 100 m dash until Bolt appeared with his 196 cm and 94 kg frame. The equivalent in the world of cross-country skiing is the difference between Olympic medal winners Maurillio deZolt (170 cm) and Juha Mieto (196 cm).

Conclusion

In this paper I have criticized two ideas about CES:

- a) that it is *essentially* about winning and losing, and
- b) that it is *essentially* a search for the genetically superior.

To my mind, the essence of CES is not to celebrate the winner and humiliate the loser, or to search for genetic superiority; it is to master the physical and mental requirements of the sport and to push the limit of an athlete’s own development within the limits potentially set by the genes they happen to be born with. It is too often forgotten that competition serves mainly as an instrument in that pursuit, and that CES is therefore for everyone regardless of ability or potential.

Seen in this light, CES can just as much be seen as a venue in which the genetically inferior can rise to the challenge to best their superiors by achieving a greater mastery of the physical and mental requirements of the sport through training. In fact, those who enter the sport with a disadvantage may reap a much greater reward if they succeed. It is no big deal for the superior athlete to win. In this case, the presence of intersexual women in female sport need not be a bad thing. And anyway, once we start to worry about the moral implications of genetic advantages, why should intersexuality have a special status compared to other innate traits that give an athlete an advantage?

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Received: 23 April 2017; Accepted: 14 June 2017