

LOST IN TRANSITION

The attempted suicide by athlete Santhi Soundararajan, stripped of her Asian Games silver after failing a 'sex test', has brought to light the plight of transitioned athletes. Danish golfer Mianne Bagger and Canadian cyclist Kristen Worley, both transitioned sportspersons, talk about their fight to ensure justice for Santhi in an exclusive chat with HT

'Who decides what is the definition of a woman?'

Mianne Bagger

The IOC stopped gender testing after the 2000 Sydney Olympics, so why do continental sports bodies like the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) continue to do so?

I guess that's the question we're all asking! One would assume that any national association under the Olympic umbrella is required to follow the same rules as set forth by the IOC. As we have since learnt that the IOC still carries out sex testing, the OCA was, in fact, merely following IOC procedures. Although the IOC announced it would stop sex testing, it has maintained the 'right' to test any athlete upon reasonable suspicion.

What needs to be questioned is the procedure for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. With regards to drugs testing, people involved in these processes are (as far as I'm aware) subject to confidentiality agreements. In Santhi's case, one of the officials privy to such test results told the media, though he had no right to do this. We have heard of no course of action against this person or the OCA but irreparable damage has been done to Santhi's life and career.

We read that Santhi has the right to appeal but this should only be required if the OCA had conducted themselves within acceptable

protocol. Santhi's rights as an athlete and as a human being were abused. There is nothing she has to defend.

Is there still ambiguity in the IOC on this?

We can only assume what people at the IOC must be thinking. There is no doubt that there seems to be some ambiguity, but it can't be about medical facts! It seems to be how they are going to deal with the issue. They have their corporate image and brand to consider. It's easy to ignore situations when they are kept at a distance and this (gender diversity, transitioned and intersexed men and

women) is an issue that still makes most people uncomfortable.

Members of these governing organisations are only people. They have the same prejudices and opinions as others and that seems to influence their decisions. We've seen this time and time again amongst golf's governing bodies. Their policies are based more on personal opinions and fears than anything else, least of all on medical facts.

The IOC made an attempt in 2004, through its 'Stockholm Consensus on sex-reassigned athletes', to make sports more inclusive. Unfortunately, their efforts still seem shrouded in their own prejudices and personal ignorance and lack of substantial supportive fact. The result was an incomplete and personally invasive policy targeting an already scrutinised minority in today's society.

Transitioned men and women are still seen as acceptable targets, as if we were something less than human. What needs to be understood is that every variation of human birth is normal and should be embraced. Sports has attempted to define what 'normal' is, and excluded certain people in the process. Organisations like the IOC need to be aware of the influence of their actions and should be leading by example rather

than operating within society's ignorance and strict stereotypes.

The Olympic Charter states that: "...the goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play."

It is also not the first time something like this has happened, but it is now that it has to stop. Santhi did not fail a sex test, she failed to meet the IOC's definition of what constitutes 'female'. She was branded as a male and as a cheat, yet she is neither. Any other silver medalist would be looked upon with admiration and respect and Santhi is deserving of no less. In fact, Santhi is an incredible inspiration in light of the condition she was born with, as she quite likely competes at a disadvantage to most others because of it.

How do women athletes react to a transitioned athlete in an event? Is there any bias/discrimination among officials?

People respond with the common misconceptions and stereotypes and their first thought is of a perceived unfair advantage. But I don't think people really know what that means. Unfair advantage compared to what or to who? There are some women in golf who hit the ball a great distance and it amazes me that no one ever questions if they have an 'unfair advantage'. They were the concerns I experienced when I first entered the professional ranks, but such are no longer an issue.

The fact remains that this is nobody else's business. People would be outraged if they were required to expose their entire medical history to compete, so why do they feel it is their right to know ours?

Some countries are developed so they understand the issue, but what do you feel should be done to spread awareness?

The truth is that ignorance still exists in varying degrees around the world and the US society has not yet been as progressive as Europe and Canada. The best thing is to promote education and research into gender diversity. This is where sport plays a key role, by openly embracing natural human diversity. Sport is something that all people can relate to at one level or another. Sport is a wonderful vehicle for the promotion of inclusiveness in the world.

Do you think the national sports federation of India or the OCA have not handled the matter properly because of their ignorance?

The IOC and all other Olympic governing bodies have been aware of gender variance for decades, yet they have failed to act on it. It is an issue often swept under the carpet and ignored, hoping it would just go away, so nobody has to deal with it.

How should an athlete cope with the stigma?

How do you advise someone on how to deal with having their life ripped from them, left powerless by governing organisations that are unaccountable? How do you advise some-



one who has been publicly humiliated, judged and sentenced by global media? The best thing I can say to Santhi is to carry herself with dignity, for she has done nothing wrong. Draw on that inner strength that won her the silver medal. That came from a drive and determination that few people have. When you have been true to yourself, you cannot hang your head in shame.

How long do you think it will take for the tide to turn?

The important thing is that the tide is turning. The wheels have well and truly been set in motion and change is inevitable. I am the first (known) transitioned woman to compete in professional golfing ranks. Kristen has achieved reinstatement in both water skiing and cycling. The best we can do is to continue leading by example. The more people join us, the easier change will become. I have collected some sayings that I live my life by and one of them is by Gandhi that states: "Be the change you wish to see in the world".

Are your efforts complemented by efforts in

other countries as well?

There are thousands of other men and women, of all race, age and ethnic backgrounds, who play their part in creating awareness and education on all issues of diversity. The internet has probably played the most significant part. Kristen and I have obviously been focused on sports and our efforts will continue to spread globally.

Do you have symposiums/meetings where you invite top athletes and IOC officials to make them aware of the whole issue?

I can't quite say that I'm the symposium holding kind of person! Kristen has made numerous presentations to sporting symposiums and meetings in recent years but as yet it is not the kind of thing I have participated in. Maybe it is something that I will play a more active role in, in future, but for now the pursuit of my first tournament win and the almost constant travel, keeps me busy enough!

As told to Ajai Masand

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