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Running Away from the Competition

In the world of Athletics everyone is doing everything that they can to be better than the rest. Some in legal ways such as more training sessions, different workouts, different diets, etc. and some not so legal such as doping. Because of this all athletes are subject to random doping tests to make sure that all are going on fairly. Those who are caught doping of course should be banned and discredited as they are knowingly cheating and gaining an unfair advantage over the competition. Some female athletes they are being caught by the doping control process because they have an unusually high amount of testosterone that their bodies produce naturally. In some cases, these women are stripped of any awards these received and maybe even temporarily banned from participating in the sport. And when they can come and participate, they must take drugs to reduce their testosterone levels to be eligible.

Under the circumstances it would be fair to assume that better athletes have more testosterone. Testosterone must be this great chemical that is a necessity to being fast, strong and competitive. With this assumption in mind it be surprising to hear that “one in six elite male athletes have testosterone levels below the normal reference range…[and] in some cases below the average for female elite athletes.” So, testosterone cannot be as impactful if there are professional athlete competing with such low testosterone levels that that would be acceptable for women’s athletics. The International Association of Athletic Federations (IAAF) citing a 2017 study argued that over “5 Nano-mols per liter of testosterone in their blood” was giving the women an unfair advantage and said that if they wanted to compete in the “400m, hurdles races, 800m, 1500m, one mile races and combined events over the same distances” they had to first lower their testosterone levels for at least six months to become eligible and keep their levels low or to compete with men. With all these regulations in place for women’s testosterone levels it is easy to forget that men’s testosterones are not regulated. So the question becomes does the IAAF have the right in telling women that they are not women enough to compete in women’s event based on guidelines that the IAAF produced?

It is my belief that these athletes with naturally occurring higher levels of testosterone should not be restricted or punished because of something they were born with. This should be view as the same as some people being taller than others, some people being more athletic than others, other biological traits that we are born with. The fact is that just because you have a natural advantage does not mean you will always win over those without said advantage. This is shown by Dutee Chand, one of the two named athletes, is unable to even pass the qualifying round of the Olympics with what are supposed to be athletes within the regulated testosterone levels. If testosterone was such a difference, make Chand should be at least making it the finals of the Olympics if not medaling. Falling at the first hurdle meaning something else must be at play beside heightened testosterone levels. This must mean that just like being tall does not make you great at basketball, having higher testosterone levels does not make you a world class runner. Looking at the study that IAAF sited shows that women with higher testosterone levels “performed slightly better (1.78 percent to 2.73 percent) than those who were in the “normal” range” for the events that the IAAF made these regulations. In the Rio 2016 Olympics Caster Semenya, a runner with higher levels of testosterone won her race by “1.18 seconds (1:55.28), or 1 percent faster than the runner-up”. However, she did not even break the world record (1:53:28) nor the Olympic record (1:53.43). Looking back to 2012 she came in 2nd place beating 3rd place by .3 seconds and 4th by .36 seconds. In 2015 she was unable to even make the finals for the 800m (2:03.18). And most recently in 2017 she came 1st (1:55.16) by .76 seconds. The women she beat both in 2016 and 2017 has a personal best of (1:55.47) and is well within the guidelines for testosterone levels. These times and results do not really show such a strong dominance that one would expect to be banned. For comparison in 2012 the men’s 800m world record was set at 1:40.91 with second place coming .82 seconds behind. Last place in came at 1:43.77 much faster the women’s world record. The difference between male and female time is huge whereas the difference in times between Semenya and the other is not anywhere that big. The biggest difference came in pole vault and hammer throw two events where there are no IAAF regulations for testosterones levels. This seems weird as the IAAF is supposed to be dedicated to make sure that these sporting events are fair yet they completely ignored two events where there is the highest level of difference.

Testosterone is clearly has an impact on women athletes. In 2015 when Semenya’s testosterone levels were suppressed she was unable to get pass the semifinal having the slowest time overall at 2:03.18 when her testosterone levels were suppressed. According to scientists once the ban is in place again it is feasible that her times would decrease by up to seven seconds from “1:55 to 2:01-2:03”. Adding to this of the 116 women currently banned for doping 64 tested positive for androgen. As per the IAAF’s research those having an abundant amount of natural testosterone have advantages over women within the normal bounds.

While testosterone does have an effect on women’s bodies the fact is that it is naturally occurring just like our height, lungs and other genetics. If you were to reduce anything about an elite athlete, you would expect their performance to decrease dramatically not only because they have lost a big in racing ability but also in your day to day life. Also, with regards to her times slowing down the first heat Semenya had the third fastest time clocking in at 1:59.59. While this would not have qualified her for the finals if she had ran this at the semifinals, it is still almost 4 seconds faster than what she ran a day later. This was when she was limited to 10 Nano-mols per liter of testosterone in her blood twice the amount that IAAF regulates now as she had been since the rules came in place since 2011. So, limiting her more would slow her down but again. But if we imposed a rule that required all runners to be 5’5 and lower and then require all runners taller than this to shrink down we would see many the top sprinters fall off and fail to even reach their personal best or even qualify for races that they were previously favorites for. Going back to Semenya even though she was still winning it was not as if she had been dominating her field. Looking the best times for the 800m from 2000-2018 we see that it bounces from 1:54.01 to 1:57.67. The fastest time does not belong to Semenya and is a more than full second faster that her personal best where she has been free to use all her testosterone. With all of this in mind it is hard to say that natural testosterone should not be treated as a natural advantage that all athletes have.

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