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Irena Martínková

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Unisex sports: challenging the binary

Irena Martínková

Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses some problems arising with respect to the male/female binary division that has traditionally been central to most sports. One strategy for dealing with this problem is to remove the binary and allow athletes of different sexes to compete together. Firstly, since there are different ways of 'mixing' athletes together, a distinction between two major kinds will be introduced: 'mixed sports' (sports with an allocated position for a number of males and females in a team, which retains the binary) and 'unisex sports' (sport participation of all athletes together based on merit, with no need to distinguish between sexes). Secondly, I shall offer a strategy for the modification of existing sports and the creation of new sports that would accommodate athletes of different sexes in 'unisex sports'. This means paying attention to how sports are constructed and which abilities/skills they test. For unisex sports, two kinds of logic are suggested: 'balance of abilities/skills logic' proposes that we should seek a balance of what we presently understand as female and male (together with sex-neutral) abilities/skills to be included in the sporting challenge; whereas 'complexity logic' proposes the creation or modification of sports so as to test for a wider spectrum of abilities/skills.

KEYWORDS Discrimination; sex segregation; inclusion; equality; complexity

Introduction

Contemporary sport has various problems with respect to the sex/gender of athletes and their participation in sport. One set of problems arises from the binary distinction of the sex of athletes that has traditionally reigned in sports; that is responsible for the existence of the two sex categories (male and female); and that is the source of two central issues: segregation and discrimination.

The primary problem arises with establishing the segregation line for the sex binary. In some sports this is done by 'sex testing', sometimes called 'femininity testing', 'gender verification', etc. (see Pieper 2016, 2ff.). Since there is no straightforward empirical line between males and females, and since maleness and femaleness are indicated by a variety of markers, it is

CONTACT Irena Martínková martinkova@ftvs.cuni.cz Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

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a matter of decision where the lines are set and what markers will be selected as decisive (Camporesi and Maugeri 2010, 379; Pieper 2016, 4f.). Sex testing in sport has always been simplified (relying usually on one marker only genitalia, or chromosomes, or the level of testosterone, etc.), which raises the inevitable problems of the unreliability of whatever test is used, and how to handle border-line cases. These problems have given rise to feelings of dissatisfaction and injustice, and continuing discussions over cases of discrimination and the humiliation of athletes (e.g. Skirstad 2000, 118f.; Krieger, Parks Pieper, and Ritchie 2019; Schultz 2019). However, even those sports that do not verify the sex of athletes by sex testing, but rely just on ID verification, are bound to face problems in the near future, because insistence on using the sex binary is in apparent conflict with the policies of those states whose governments allow a third sex (neutral sex) in the ID documents of their citizens. We may ask: in which of the binary categories will the neutral sex athletes compete? And: how will this be determined?

However, once the distinction is set, further problems arise. Our distinction between male and female characteristics and our attribution of them to different sports sometimes leads us to distinguish between 'male sports' and 'female sports'. 'Male sports' are then those in which contemporary understandings of abilities/skills thought to be characteristic of males form a considerable part of the sporting challenge (e.g. strength, explosive power, speed and/or larger physical size); while 'female sports' are sports in which contemporary understandings of abilities/skills thought to be characteristic of females form a considerable part of the challenge (e.g. grace, coordination, flexibility, balance, buoyancy, smaller physical size).

This view of sports often leads to cases of discrimination, intimidation and prejudice against athletes. For example, problems arise for females taking part in 'male sports', if not conforming to a stereotypical notion of the female (e.g. McDonagh and Pappano 2008, 204f.; Koenigsberger 2017, 336), and similarly, there is an issue of male athletes facing discrimination when taking part in 'female sports' (e.g. Spiegel International 2009). The fact that the majority of sports are, in these terms, 'male' means that being included in the female category contributes to the perception of female athletes as the inferior sex. The distinction between 'male sports' and 'female sports' sometimes results in unequal sporting formats for female and male categories, usually without any explicit justification - for example, different number of sets in tennis (see Davis and Edwards 2017), fewer disciplines in the heptathlon as compared with the decathlon, or different weight of equipment in track-and-field (see Ferez, Ruffié, and Héas 2018, 180). In professional sport, this differentiation is also sometimes correlated with unequal pay (e.g. Archer and Prange 2019).

The binary also leads to discrimination against some athletes with respect to participation in a specific sex category. This includes, for example, talented

female athletes competing in the male category in 'male sports'. Problems also arise for the participation of athletes who do not neatly fit into the binary, mostly transwomen and intersex athletes competing in the female category in 'male sports'. One problematic issue here is the IOC or IAAF rules for eligibility to compete in the female category, which raises questions about the medicalization of the treatment of transwomen and intersex athletes (e.g. Karkazis et al. 2012; Newbould 2016, 257f.), and the length of the preparatory period for transwomen (e.g. Devine 2019, 164). There has also been a considerable discussion about whether transwomen and intersex athletes have an advantage and, if so, whether this is unfair. While some studies emphasize an unfair physiological advantage for transwomen (e.g. Knox, Anderson, and Heather 2019), some authors advocate an unconditional inclusion, turning our attention to other values than equality and unfair advantage (e.g. Gleaves and Lehrbach 2016, who highlight the value of meaningful narratives).

Much discussion that focusses on transwomen and intersex athletes centres on the value of equality, pointing to the difficulty and complexity of resolving the issue scientifically (e.g. Foddy and Savulescu 2011), and suggesting solutions as to how sport should be organized to fit athletes of different sex in a more appropriate way. Some authors think it would be useful to remove the sex category from sport, in favour of devising more relevant non-sex categories. For example, Tännsjö (2000) argues for non-discrimination of female athletes in sports, suggesting a solution of devising non-sex categories (weight and height), and also rules for punishing the aggressive acts of athletes. Bianchi (2017) suggests a handicap system determined by the athlete's effective testosterone levels within the female category (including transwomen). Two categorizations based on the system of Paralympic classification have also been proposed by Anderson, Knox, and Heather (2019), who suggest an algorithm based on physical and social factors of athletes, and by Kerr and Obel (2018, 314) who introduce categorization '... based on the traits that result in superior performance in that particular sport', such as LBM or VO_2 max capacity, together with categories such as height, etc. with respect to the given sport. It is true that creating a new non-sex category might solve the problem with the sex category, but it will likely create new problems. For example, for the weight category it might cause excessive dieting. Also, as English (1978) says: 'The very need for a protected competition class suggests inferiority' and so, in sports where heaviness is an advantage, light categories are often considered as inferior to the heavy ones.

So, since the medical/biological perspective, which has been predominant so far in addressing many of the above-mentioned issues, has not brought conclusive answers and solutions to some of these contemporary problems, some authors have been turning to the importance of the meaning and values of sport (e.g. Foddy and Savulescu 2011; Karkazis et al. 2012; Camporesi and Maugeri 2016, 56; Gleaves and Lehrbach 2016). However, it is not simply we who determine values in sport per se - values in sport are created through sport itself, and therefore have to be derived from the activity itself. That is, we should return to a consideration of sport rules and the values underlying them and, if we judge that some are not suitable for contemporary sport, we should revise the rules.

The main idea of this paper is to offer a solution to the above problems by suggesting the eradication of 'the binary', based on a reconsideration of how sports have been created/constructed with respect to their constitutive rules. It advocates 'unisex sports', i.e. sports that are inclusive for athletes of all sexes without discrimination,² in a competition based on merit. This means paying attention to how sports are constructed and which abilities/skills they test within the sporting challenge. For unisex sports, two kinds of logic are suggested: 'balance of abilities/skills logic' proposes that we should seek a balance of what we presently understand as female and male (together with sexneutral) abilities/skills to be included in the sporting challenge; whereas 'complexity logic' proposes the creation or modification of sports so as to test for a wider spectrum of abilities/skills. If constructed with respect to complexity, these unisex sports would offer the possibility for athletes of differing endowments to thrive, being inclusive with respect not only to sex, but also with respect to the intra-sex varieties of bodily characteristics.3 In biological terms, we might say: cultivating athletes' wider genetic endowment.

For this purpose, it is necessary to observe the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. The creation of sports in which athletes of all sexes can take part in the same competition based on merit ('unisex sports') requires a consideration of the empirical differences between sexes in human biology (physiology and anatomy) that are relevant to the given sport (see e.g. English 1978; Anderson, Knox, and Heather 2019). This is important for creating rules that formulate the challenge (test) in sports.

The creation of unisex sports will help to eradicate or minimise problems arising from the binary distinction that occur directly in the sport competition, and that are (at least partly) based in human biology (such as e.g. the separation of females and males in sport, the necessity for female sex verification, and uneven sporting formats for male and female categories). It may also help to decrease some problems arising with respect to gender (e.g. helping female athletes to gain the same conditions for sport participation as males have). But, of course, there will also be need of other strategies for sex and gender equality in sport.4

The origin of sports and the binary division

The beginnings of competitive sport reach far back into history, starting with ancient Greek times. The male/female binary has been part of this development



since the very beginning (when females could not participate or even watch male events in the Ancient Olympic Games, on pain of sanction). From the beginning of sport, most sports were created by males and for males, as a result of males having the dominant power in early societies, and their inclination towards muscular performances (see more detailed analysis by Rowe 2016). English (1978) gives a nice portrayal of what sports could look like these days had things been different – if women had been dominant in society⁵:

But if women had been the historically dominant sex, our concept of sport would no doubt have evolved differently. Competitions emphasizing flexibility, balance, strength, timing, and small size might dominate Sunday afternoon television and offer salaries in six figures. Men could be clamoring for equal press coverage of their champions.

Historically, individual sports were created from various sources: combat (combat sports, track-and-field events), free-time social and entertainment activities (games like football, tennis, table tennis), daily locomotion activities and outdoor activities (cycling, skiing, rock climbing), health and fitness (gymnastics), religion (dance), and so on. So, most of our sports developed from more organic origins, and only a minority of sports was artificially created, in the way that the need for an indoor venue gave rise to basketball. The vast majority of contemporary sports are products of pragmatic and/or entertainment thinking, and the skills tested in them are a result of the given source activity. They were not constructed on the basis of some desirable social logic, and so most sports test arbitrary abilities/skills (within the patriarchal setting), and some of them are also guite limited in the scope of abilities/skills they test.

Within these considerations, sex has not been explicitly considered as a criterion for the formulation/creation of the challenge, apart from some sports that were created especially for females. This meant mostly either the creation of a female category, sometimes accompanied by a modification of the sport's rules (e.g. the female version of ice-hockey does not have the body-check rule). Some sports created mixed teams (by the allocation of male and female places within a team), such as in tennis mixed doubles, or in korfball, where male and female athletes are allocated to different positions on the court. This is an important development for giving females an option of participation in sports together with males. However, all of the above approaches retain the male/female distinction - they circulate the binary, and thus perpetuate the problem.

In summary: As a result of historical development, we have a female/male binary in sport, and since most contemporary sports contain tests in which the male characteristics such as strength, explosive power, speed and/or larger physical size play an important or decisive role, presently it is male athletes who dominate over females in most sports, while talented female



athletes who could compete with males are often restricted into the female category. This distinction also affects male participation in female sports and creates many other problems, such as those mentioned above. To tackle these problems, it is worthwhile to think of how to eradicate them at their very source, i.e. by removing 'the binary'.

Sex integration in sport

The simplest solution to the problem of the male/female binary would be its complete removal, allowing the mixing of athletes of all sexes together in competition, which could take different forms. This 'mixing' has been referred to in various ways, e.g. 'mixed competition', 'mixed sport', 'mixed gender competition', 'gender-neutral sports', 'co-ed sports', 'sex-integrated sport', etc., but these terms are not used consistently, sometimes referring to the same and sometimes to different kinds of 'mixing' of athletes.

Some authors have promoted the idea of sex integration, without proposing any modifications to sports. For example, Kane (1995) presented the idea of sport as a continuum, that suggests that, since some females outperform many males, they should be supported if they wish to compete against them. Kane's (ibid, 209 f) example is that of a marathon in which females and males competed together. With 4,076 male and 1,423 female athletes competing, the first female was 66th, which means that she was beaten by 65 males. However, at the same time, she beat 4,011 males, exhibiting a continuum of performance that includes both sexes. Nevertheless, this strategy would be problematic if applied to all females without any other additional strategies, since in many sports, such as tennis and football, it is likely that it would lead to the exclusion of the majority of female athletes from contemporary elite sport entirely (for more problems with this approach see Sailors 2014, 70f.). Anyway, the great benefit of a female category in tennis and football is that it requires female champions.⁶

So, in most sports, it is simply not possible to mix athletes together without any kind of intervention, since this would put the 'protected' group (usually female athletes) at a severe competitive disadvantage, and destroy their possibilities for successful sport participation (see also discussions of this point by Sailors 2014, 2016b). Luckily, the times seem to be welcoming changes, and after all, the IOC itself is calling for a change in competition formats with respect to gender equality (see Recommendation 2: Competition Formats and Technical Rules, IOC 2018a).

There have been suggested different strategies of mixing athletes, under different terms, and sometimes it is not clear what kind of integration the authors mean by it. Some types of mixing retain the binary, whilst some require a more inclusive relation and thus can solve the above-listed problems arising from the binary. So we first need to distinguish between the two main kinds of competition formats which mix athletes of different sexes, which I shall call 'mixed sports' and 'unisex sports', so that we can see advantages and disadvantages of both strategies. The distinction is important since, unlike the mixed sports that protect female athletes within existing 'male sports', the unisex sports must be made-up from tests that are fair for all sexes, and this will often mean the necessity to modify existing sports. In any case, the strategy of mixing athletes needs to be thought through carefully and applied sensitively, since not all mixing of athletes will lead to desirable results.

Mixed sports

I propose to use the phrase 'mixed sports' just for those sports that allow male athletes to compete with and against female athletes, based on the allocation of places. Thus, male athlete(s) and female athlete(s) are members of the same team, playing against a team of the same make-up. This is in line with how this term has usually been used in sports for this kind of event, being called a 'mixed-sex event' or 'mixed-gender event'.

This is not a new competition format. It has traditionally been used in tennis (for teams of mixed doubles, meaning one male and one female on the team), but more such events have been introduced recently, e.g. 4×400m relays in track-and-field, and four-person teams in Alpine skiing parallel slalom, both of which include two males and two females per team. The IOC uses this strategy for fulfilling its aim of gender equality in sport. This is seen in the fact that the number of mixed events for the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2020 has doubled since Rio 2016 from 9 to 18 mixed events (IOC 2018b, 2019). It had already been a successful innovative strategy in the first Youth Olympic Games in 2010 (Parry 2012). Most mixed events are an additional category to already existing male and female categories, while some are the only format of the given sport (korfball, quidditch), which therefore may be considered as promoting equality of the sexes to a greater extent. However, neither sport is on the Olympic programme.

This strategy has its benefits, and apart from bringing some exciting new formats, it affects certain problems that arise with respect to gender (not sex) in sport. Importantly, it enriches sports with the interaction of female and male athletes, providing them with the same or similar conditions (training, accessibility, finance, etc.). One aspect of sport's powerful effect in society is that it enables a space wherein people meet and cooperate together on a given task set by rules. It is also a powerful means of education. When this is done in the separation of sexes, athletes miss their chance of learning cooperation and communication with athletes of different sexes (all sexes) within a task that demands physicality (see also McDonagh and Pappano 2008, 213). If males and females need to cooperate and communicate within



one team, they learn to understand and treat each other in a productive way, which is an added value over segregated sports. This is demonstrated in a contemporary quote of Martyn Rooney, British 4×400m relay veteran, in The Telegraph (Bloom 2019):

Rooney says the event has also posed challenges of how best to accommodate athletes of hugely varying sizes.

"The training is guite interesting because there's a massive difference in heights and bodyweights," he says.

"It's quite imposing for some of the smaller girls. You put Zoey [Clark] next to me – I'm 6ft 6in and she's 5ft 5in, so it's quite tough for her when I've been giving her a shove in the back.

"But she's been giving it back and the girls have all become more confident and aggressive. It's going to be exciting."

This is an example of a positive approach, and with more sports accommodating this possibility, more of this kind of learning should come about. The opportunity for mixing athletes can make sport more exciting and attractive to youth, while athletes can become more sensitive and accommodating to others. This is not to say that there are no problems with athletes of different sexes competing together, but at least such mixed practice gives rise to interactions that can be reflected upon, communicated, and possibly lead to change of attitudes, rather than to stay in silent separation (see a list of positive and negative examples in Sailors 2016a, 79f.).

However, this strategy remains problematic, since it circulates (reinforces) the binary, because female athletes get an allocated place, which is a protected place for the subordinate sex. This strategy continues to suggest that, when not the recipient of an allocated place, females will continue to need a protected category within the sport in general. The existence of mixed doubles in tennis does nothing to argue against the existence of separate male and female singles categories. So the problems still remain – there is still a need for female sex verifications, questions about how intersex and transgender athletes should fit in, etc. So, most problems caused by the binary distinction are mirrored here, and female athletes are still seen and treated as an inferior sex.

In the following section, I want to suggest a competition format that is more radical than mixed sports, i.e. unisex sports, which would help to remove the binary and give a chance for athletes of all sexes to compete together based on merit. But for this step, we cannot just cancel the contemporary sex category. We also need to re-think sports and their rules.



Unisex sports

'Unisex sports' are sports suitable for the participation of athletes of all sexes, based on merit (i.e. not on allocation of a protected place in a team, as in mixed sports). In fact, some sports are unisex already, being already recognized as such (e.g. equestrianism), and some others could become unisex without any necessity for change (since there is no unfair advantage for either of the sex categories, e.g. shooting), whilst most sports would need some modification (e.g. most contemporary sports).

So, firstly, there are not many unisex sports on offer now. The only Olympic sport that is unisex is equestrianism. However, there are different unisex races in extreme endurance sports. For example, the results of a 7-day-long winter race along the Pennine Way in England (the Montane® Spine® Race – https:// thespinerace.com/spine-race) show that it is a unisex sport in the sense that athletes of all sexes compete together, and the results are shown in one table. Whilst this race is not fully sex-blind, since their sex is still mentioned, we can see that, although there are not so many female participants, females are doing well and the overall course record is held by a female.

Secondly, there are some candidates for unisex sports without the necessity of modification, which have not yet been recognized such by their sport federations. As long ago as 1978, Jane English started to think about the importance of integrating female and male athletes in sporting competition, suggesting that we should integrate sports in which sex is not relevant (dressage, riflery, car racing) and those in which '... the differences between the sexes may be too small to justify separate classes - as in diving and freestyle skiing' (272). She continued, '[i]n still others, the sexes have compensating differences. In channel swimming, for instance, men are advantaged in strength, but women profit from an insulating layer of fat' (272). (However, this raises the difficult issue of the equivalence of compensating differences: How much strength compensates for how much fat?)

Similarly to English's strategies, some authors have highlighted certain individual sports that could be unisex without any modification. Based on the norm for equal opportunity to perform, Loland (2002, 58) listed golf, archery and shooting as sports that highlight technical and tactical skills, which are more dominant in the performance than the abilities that form the foundation of the performance (speed, strength and endurance), and so these sports could be considered as unisex. Hämäläinen (2014) has suggested the possibility of sex integration in ski-jumping, which has three events: from large hills, normal hills and flying hills. He suggested a fully integrated race for ski-jumping from flying hills.

Thirdly, in the solution to follow, I shall try to devise a strategy that will enable other sports to become unisex based on a change of their constitutive rules. Fortunately, sports are not static activities - rather, they are regularly

modified. They were modified from their source activities to become sports in the first place, which meant to undergo standardization (e.g. Guttmann 1978; Loland 2006, 153). Even contemporary sports change regularly - modifications are made, for example, with respect to the use of new technologies, or to commercial interests, or to adjusting the challenge in line with the development of athletes and norms of playing. So it does not seem to require a major re-think to seek to adjust them to fit better our contemporary requirement for equality of sex/gender.

This is in line with Sailors (2016b), who advocated rethinking sports with respect to four distinctions (individual/team sports; direct/indirect competition; contact/non-contact sports; amateur/professional sports) with the aim of giving an opportunity for the mixing of athletes. I think that, for this aim, it is necessary also to rethink traditional sports/events individually with respect to their constitutive rules, while keeping in mind Sailors' distinctions. I shall offer two main approaches for this: the 'balance of abilities/skills logic' and 'complexity logic'. These two approaches can be applied separately, but they are most efficient if applied together.

Unisex sports - the 'balance of abilities/skills logic'

In line with English (1978), sports that accommodate all athletes are those sports in which 'the sexes have compensating difference', or in other words, which have a balanced challenge with respect to both sexes. This is not easy to do, since it is an empirical matter that is a result of our historical development, but it is possible to strive for the ideal.

Let us examine the issue from the point of view of majority sports, i.e. 'male sports'. It is true that there may be exceptionally talented female athletes who might outperform males in 'male sports' (see various examples in McDonagh and Pappano 2008, chapter 6). It is highly likely that, if women historically had the same conditions and upbringing as men, more female athletes could outperform more male athletes (see also Tamburrini 2000). Some female athletes who could compete with male athletes, and as a result of it become better than females who just played in the female category, report it as valuable experience (e.g. see a study in Canadian ice-hockey by Theberge 1998, 191). Also, as females gain more experience in sport, we will doubtless see increasingly better performances (e.g. in the contemporary female category in tennis). It is difficult to say whether the two sexes might become equal in the given sport if they had had the same conditions during the history of the sport's development – and unfortunately we cannot make this kind of experiment.

So, given the contemporary situation, males and females differ as to their abilities/skills, and so we have female and male categories in most sports, and we usually distinguish between 'male sports' and 'female sports'. For the purpose of unisex sports, the rules of sports would need to be adjusted so

that they contain a balance of skills pertaining to the two sexes for the purpose of articulating the challenge in the given sport. Thus, the 'balance of abilities/skills logic' means that abilities/skills characteristic of males and females are included in the sporting challenge in a balanced way, while also including various characteristics that are the same or similar for all sexes, without restriction. This issue has already been suggested by Tännsjö (2000) who thinks that unique qualities in female sports, such as 'inventiveness, sensibility, cooperation, strategy, playfulness, wit, and so forth' (109) should be added into sports, and in many cases exchanged for existing qualities (110).

Obviously, a problem arises here of the distinction between abilities/skills that pertain to males and females (see more in Jönsson 2007, 244ff.). This distinction is an empirical matter, since this is the result of human biology together with historical development and social conditions, and so it can only be resolved according to contemporary cultural arrangements. Currently, as a result of a longterm discrimination against some groups, we can distinguish (more or less) differences with respect to females and males. There have been various considerations of what might be called unique male, female or sex-neutral abilities/skills in the literature (e.g. Tännsjö 2000, 109; Sailors 2014, 67). The major factor seems to be those abilities and skills such as strength, explosive power, speed and/or larger physical size that dominate with males; and grace, coordination, flexibility, balance, buoyancy, smaller physical size, which are more characteristic for females, while tactical and creative thinking, accuracy/precision, cooperation and timing seem to be sex-neutral. It is important to note that these abilities/skills are merely the contemporary view, and that new strategies employed in sports may change our understanding of what is specifically male, female or neutral ability/skill for the future, and so sports will need to be reconsidered (re-balanced) repeatedly to these new conceptualizations. Similarly, finding 'the right balance' for a particular sport will need repeated re-consideration.

In a way, we can say that, in order to devise unisex sports, we first need to distinguish between those abilities and skills, characteristic of athletes of different sexes, that are of importance in the creation of these sports in the contemporary context. However, in the actual practice of unisex sport, sexes are of course not relevant. Unisex sport itself is sex-blind.

Since it is difficult to balance female and male abilities/skills and to make sure that neither of the sexes has an unfair advantage, it might be useful to add another strategy in order to ensure that more skills/abilities are tested, such as those sex-neutral ones. In thus adding an aspect of complexity, it will not matter so much if the balancing is not 'just right'.

Unisex sports – 'complexity logic'

Complex sports are those sports that test a wide range of human abilities/ skills. 'Complexity logic' goes as follows: if more abilities are tested, then

a wider range of athletes can participate and succeed as a result of various combinations of abilities/skills. Also, as Loland (2002, 69) says: 'Performance in sports with more complex technical and tactical requirements depends to a lesser degree on advantageous predispositions to develop one specialized bio-motor ability.' This means that a certain genetic advantage (e.g. being tall or having large hands) brings a slight advantage, but not an overwhelming one. Different people have different (genetic) gifts, and in a complex system they may look for a specific solution to the given challenge, based on their gifts, in a more creative way than in straightforward performances in narrowly specialized sports.

This is in line with Loland's (2006) 'sustainable development' proposal for sport, within which we could see complex sports as complex social systems: '... a complex social system can be seen as a system in which individuals have a high number of potential ways of realizing their "innate and trained abilities" (149), while specialized sports are non-sustainable. Loland (2000, 2006) offers various ways of making specialized sports more complex, giving the example of modification of the 100m sprint. He suggests abandoning performance measurements (counting relative performances here and now rather than an abstract performance), de-standardization (sprinters running from between 30m and 300m) and increased demands on technical complexity (mastering different sprint distances on different surfaces) (Loland 2006, 150).

The best examples of complex sports are ball games. Even within ball games, however, some sports are more complex and accommodate a larger variety of athletes than others. For example, unlike basketball or volleyball (sports that tend to prefer tall athletes), football accommodates different types of players with respect to different sizes/shapes of the body and abilities. Nevertheless, even in this complex sport, most male athletes overpower most females because of the importance of strength, explosive power and speed within the game (at least at the moment). The example of football shows that even complex sports may favour male athletes, if the challenge is based on characteristics in which males dominate over females. On the other hand, some more specialized sports may be suitable for athletes of all sexes, if the challenge incorporates abilities that are not sex-specific, or are balanced with respect to both sexes (e.g. equestrianism). So, in order to enable sport for athletes of all sexes, we need more than complexity - we need primarily the 'balance of abilities/skills logic'.

However, what complexity adds to the 'balance of abilities/skills logic' is a wider inclusion of athletes. Complex sports will always include more athletes of a different make-up than narrowly specialized sports, which is also partly relevant to biological sex, but very relevant to individual athletes of different sizes/shapes and abilities/skills. For example, equestrian sport (e.g. dressage) includes all sexes (dressage does not require knowledge of the sex



of the rider – although it does require the identification of the sex of the horse!), since the challenge in dressage is a comparable test for an athlete of any sex. However, equestrian sport is not a complex sport, since it accommodates mainly athletes of smaller body size and weight, and so many athletes of heavier weight may feel excluded.

Creating unisex sports

So, not all unisex sports have to be complex sports, but it is more advantageous if unisex sports are complex, so that we enable greater inclusion and minimalize possible mistakes in balancing the abilities and skills of the two sexes.

We have (at least) three possibilities to create unisex sports:

- 1) As English (1978) said, we should integrate athletes of those sports in which sex is not relevant and those in which '... the differences between the sexes may be too small to justify separate classes' (272). This group might contain sports in which neither the male nor the female characteristics are currently dominant, e.g. shooting, diving and possibly also ski-jumping from flying hills.
- 2) We might modify existing sports in two ways. We might either modify the given sport itself and create just one unisex sport out of it, or leave the existing sport as it is and add a new unisex category (having three sex categories: male, female and unisex; or four categories: male, female, mixed and unisex). However, the new unisex category will differ from the sex category, since it will rather be a modified version of the sport. (This sometimes happens already with the female category in some sports, e.g. the female and male categories in ice-hockey have slightly different rules).

The aim for the unisex sport would be to increase the balance of the tested abilities/skills in favour of the existing subordinate group, and/or to increase its complexity. And so, constitutive rules can make sure that certain sexspecific advantages are avoided and replaced by more complex strategies. For example, in ice-hockey, the body-check is vastly related to power, and so to create sport more in line with unisex logic would mean to avoid it in favour of other strategies (e.g. tactical), that would better fit the game.

It is clear that we cannot change all sports to fit the unisex sports model in the same way. For some sports the challenge might be re-formulated to include more tactics, or sometimes equipment might be adjusted so as to suit everyone (e.g. archery) and so forth. It is up to the given sport federation to carry out modifications sensitively with respect to the sport in question, so that it is approved and accepted by the given sporting community.

3) Another way is to devise new sports (complex or specialized), with balanced abilities for all sexes. However, it is good to keep in mind that, for greater inclusion of athletes of different shapes and sizes, it is likely that



complex unisex sports will be more sustainable than specialized unisex sports, according to Loland's 'sustainability' logic (2006, 148 ff.).

Of course, there are other factors that will influence how easy/difficult it will be to make sports unisex. These are listed by Sailors (2014, 75, 2016b) who distinguishes between individual/team sports; direct/indirect competition; contact/ non-contact sports; and amateur/professional sports. It is likely that indirect competition (consecutive or in a parallel way) at the amateur level will accommodate female and male athletes in an easier way than direct competition in professional combat sport. So these aspects need to be taken into consideration as well.

The creation of unisex sports will probably not be just a one-step process, but sports rules will have to be reconsidered regularly with respect to possible changes in the characteristics of athletes (e.g. females becoming stronger through greater possibilities of participation).

Conclusion

Creating unisex sports will enrich the possibilities that we have for playing sports, not just on an accidental basis of historical development, but on desirable social logic. Each sport federation needs to think carefully about the potential of the sports they take care of, so that they accommodate equally all athletes. Not all sports can or need to be changed into unisex sports. It may well be that some sports will stay with their binary sex category, possibly also with the mixed category, and unisex will be an additional category for those who are interested. Time will show which will become more or less popular. The distinction between mixed and unisex sports/categories can highlight the difference in the kind of integration the sport offers. But it is important to have a unisex option for those who are interested. Until we see the integration of sexes in sports only as allocation, and not real integration based on merit, the full transition into equality of sexes is unlikely to occur.

I believe that this strategy is a worthwhile avenue for preventing some of our existing problems. But it is also important in terms of adding value to sport, since overcoming segregation, competing with and at the same time against each other, means having opportunities to see each other as individual people, with strengths and weaknesses, having to interact within a pre-given cooperative situation, rather than seeing each other as being of a different sex, from a different planet. This very opportunity to interact can prevent prejudices about other sexes, and enable us to learn to interact more appropriately even outside sports. Also, if complex, these new or modified unisex sports would offer opportunities for different kinds of athletes to thrive, not just with respect to sex, but also with respect to other differences – in biological terms we may say: they would enable the cultivation of athletes' wider genetic endowment.

The creation of unisex sports will not solve all of our problems with respect to sex and gender in sport. Obviously, there are still many problems, such as the under-representation of women in governing bodies and directive positions (Koenigsberger 2017), sexual harassment (e.g. Johansson and Lundqvist 2017), and the trivialization and sexual objectification of female athletes (Weaving and Samson 2018), etc., which will need to be tackled in a different way. In any case, it is clear that achieving sex/gender equality will take time, because ideas about the superiority/inferiority of sexes/genders that pertain in present society are deeply engrained (see e.g. Fink, LaVoi, and Newhall 2016, 1329). So, English's (1978) phrase 'sex-blindness' can be applied only to the actual competition. However, I am suggesting that sport administrators should not be 'sex-blind', since they need to remain sensitive to sex and gender issues when devising sport rules and addressing other contemporary problems in sports.

Notes

- 1. E.g. for cases in contemporary football, in which girls compete with boys for a limited age span, and then are forced to leave, even if they are good enough to continue, see e.g. Edwards, Davis, and Forbes (2015); for an overview of historical cases of females competing with males in the USA, see McDonagh and Pappano (2008, chapter VI).
- 2. I refer to discrimination in both senses of the word in the sense of discrimination as distinction and in the moral sense of discrimination as depriving athletes of various possibilities and benefits.
- 3. For example, small light men have a smaller chance of success in some 'male sports', such as, e.g. in basketball, volleyball, American football.
- 4. See similar conclusions of empirical research: 'Thus, while sex-integrated sport has the potential to challenge gender ideologies, it appears the strong and pervasive patriarchy of male-centered, male-run, and male-dominated sport culture makes it difficult for its full positive potential to be realized, even with one of the best female basketball teams in the country. However, perhaps if sexintegrated experiences were more common in youth sport, they could provide early and consistent interruptions of the gender binary that might render future sex-integrated experiences stronger mechanisms for feminist resistance' (Fink, LaVoi, and Newhall 2016, 1329).
- 5. See also a description of such a society by Schneider (2000, 135f.).
- 6. A middle way is advocated by McDonagh and Pappano (2008, 215), who favour the possibility of females playing on male teams, for those who wish to do so. They speak in favour of segregated categories on a voluntary basis. See also the 'open category' strategy (in Martínková 2020).
- 7. Hämäläinen (2014) also argued for a handicap system for females to be able to compete with males in ski-jumping from large hills and normal hills. He claimed that, if female athletes started from a higher gate they could compete equally with male athletes. However, this handicap system allows females to be seen as inferior, requiring a handicap (for more problems with this approach see Pakaslahti 2017).



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