

# [In began. taking part is no longer an](https://assignbuster.com/in-began-taking-part-is-no-longer-an/)

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In the 2017 movie Battle of the Sexes, the story of tennisstar Billie Jean King’s staged showdown with former champion Bobby Riggs, the 55year-old Riggs says of his 29 year-old opponent: “ Billie JeanKing is one of the all-time greats. She’s a superstar.

But she doesn’t stand achance against me. Women’s tennis is so far beneath men’s tennis.” 1 As well asreminding us that King beat Riggs in straight sets to prove him wrong, themovie raised a fundamental question debated for decades: should women and men compete against each other insport? Day to day, women and men work, live and socialise together. Increasingly, women are reaching the top in business, competing directly against men to getthose jobs.

In other previously male dominated areas, they are now becoming MPsand even bishops. However, it seems that sport remains the only context insociety where we “ accept, expect and even defend sex segregation as the statusquo”. 2 The go-to argument sustaining this situation isfocused on differences in physical ability between men and women. In myopinion, it is an argument that has been inadequately challenged and examined foridentifying possible change in sporting competition between the sexes. We can blame history; the more ancient the history, the greater the weight it seems to carry. Sport in ancient Greece was almost exclusivelya male domain.

Early sports were based on the physical superiority of oneplayer against another: faster runners, stronger wrestlers, those who couldthrow further. Ancient societies in which men dominated women would not evenconsider the possibility of female participation in sport. Interestingly, unmarried women were allowed to attend ancient Olympic events and a separate’foot race’ for these ladies was sometimes organised. Married women, however, were not even allowed as spectators. 3 It took a while for the modern, post-1896 Olympics toinclude women. Baron de Coubertin, father of the modern Olympics, said: “ Nomatter how toughened a sportswoman may be, her organism is not cut out tosustain certain shocks. Her nerves rule her muscles; nature wanted it thatway.” 4 The 1900 games allowed women’s tennis and golf, but nomore.

It was not until the 1920s that much greater involvement began. Takingpart is no longer an issue: in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, some 45% of the 11, 000athletes competing were women – but, with the exception of equestrianism, stillcompeting only against each other. 5 Supporters of the ‘ physicality’ argument would say thatit is precisely because of the need for a level playing field, where one cancompare like-with-like, that the sexes should continue to compete separately. While male and female gymnasts might perform the same routine on the same matin front of the same judges, it is arguably easier to choose winners betweentwo men of similar size and shape than between a man and a woman of differingphysical appearance. That is before even considering strength and fitness. There is an overwhelming weight of scientific researchsupporting the thesis that genetic factors alone would allow men to succeedagainst women in most forms of sport – height, weight, bodyfat, muscle mass, aerobic capacity and anaerobic threshold all matter. Women are getting stronger and faster, but so are men. In addition, although women may be improving at a faster rate as more femaleathletes begin to train, it is unrealistic to forecast an eventual closing ofthe female-male gaps in track times or field distances.

In 1992, physiologists Whipp and Ward asked, “ Willwomen soon outrun men?” 6. Based on rates of improvements in female runningtimes since the 1920s, they believed the first ‘ catch-up’ event would come by 1998, in a marathon. However, by the endof 1998, the women’s world record for the marathon was still more than 10minutes behind the men’s. 7 By 2016, the gap had widened to 12 minutes. Clearlyimprovements rarely move in a straight line for long periods.  In 2004, Tatum, Guerra and others, using thesame methods, predicted that if current trends continued, the female winner ofthe 100m final at the 2156 Olympics would win in a faster time than the men’sevent. Even less convincing was the idea that the same simplistic ‘ straightline trend’ approach would have women pole-vaulting heights close to 17 metresin the same year, against a record of 6 metres today.

8 The case for looking beyond science and history isbased firstly in the belief that the physicality argument is more complex thatmany imagine and secondly on grounds of continuing unreasonable discriminationand bias.   Male genetic differences, specifically the primarymale hormone testosterone, highlight deficiencies which female athletes maywant to (illegally) correct in order to perform better in sport.  Drug testing revealing high testosterone insportswomen will usually point to cheating.

There are often exceptions, withSouth African runner and Olympic gold medallist Caster Semenya a notable anomaly. Semenya’s impressive performance andrelatively powerful physique prompted not just drug, but gender testing. Thisrevealed body traits that did not conform to typical male / female differences, defining her as ‘ intersex’. She identifies and continues to compete as a woman.

9 The Semenya case is one of many considerations addingcomplexity to sports physicality. Discrimination is also a very broad area. Atan everyday level, young girls are regularly prevented by their own sportsclubs from participating in mixedcompetition on grounds of the risk of harm to themselves and others, while TraceyCrouch MP was not allowed to join a parliamentary football team because at thattime FIFA rules stated that only girls aged 11 and under could play in mixedteams. 10 The sports managementindustry, whose leadership remains predominantly male, possibly fears a’dumbing down’ of competitive sport for spectators if men play directly againstwomen. Restrained performances from men in the interests of fairness and alevel playing field, imposed by new rules for mixed teams, could be seen asdampening excitement in games across a range of sports. It could be argued thatat least some players would not be giving their best if restricted by tightersafety and other considerations necessary to match men and women more evenly. Less exciting fixtures would mean fewer spectators and lower income for theindustry.

Billy Jean King was able to beat Bobby Riggs for manyreasons. She was younger, much fitter, had trained more consistently and -importantly – she respected her opponent. He admitted he had “ underestimated” her. 11 Like many who continue to believe that women and menshould not face each other on a sports field, Riggs’s flawed assessment of Kingwas possibly based solely on his idea of physical prowess.  I believe that there is a good deal ofpotential for closing the physical ability gap between men and women in manysports where speed, bulk and sheer strength are not the only determinants ofsuccess.

Tennis may be one such sport. It has developed essentially from agame, where over the last 150 years men have increasingly used strength as awinning factor: faster serves, greater endurance and sometimes heightadvantages.  Yet it could be argued thatthere are few male players, even at the top of the game, who could have beatenthe Williams sisters in recent years. It is debatable whether these strong, technically brilliant women needed the female game’s ‘ allowance’ of playingfewer sets. Also racquet based, badminton’s elements of techniqueand strategy make it accessible to both men and women, who often play asdoubles.

They might make well-matched opponents in mixed singles if such organisedcompetitions were allowed to develop. Similarly, a number of team sports whichare not played on the basis of ‘ full contact’ could also allow mixed squads. Netball, largely a women’s sport, could ultimately recruit men. Lacrosse, againplayed mainly by women in the UK, is popular with men in North America.

The rapid development of women’s football across theworld in recent years demonstrates, in my view, that where there is willingnessfor sport’s ruling bodies to encourage gender diversity, or even simply anopportunity to take part, then there is the beginning of a larger change inmindset about women eventually competing against men.  Athletics may well remain gender-segregatedfor undeniable reasons of physicality. Very few women rugby players would everfancy their chances against the All Blacks. However, a combination of goodsense and a belief in greater equality within sport could lead some clubs andfederations to consider at least trialling mixed participation. Field events such as shooting or archery might presentexamples where the gap between men and women is already narrow – and could benarrowed further. Governments and other financial backers might consider formalreviews of sports with mixed competition potential.

It is too easy to fall back on historicalpractices and the ‘ physical’ argument. The common ground between female andmale players of sport has by no means been fully explored. ENDS  1498 words  NOTES  1. Battle of the Sexes (2017) Fox SearchlightPictures    Dirs: J Dayton, V Faris 2. Milner, AN & Braddock, JH (Praeger, 2016) Sex segregation in sport: why separate is not equal 3. University of PennsylvaniaMuseum of Anthropology and Archaeology (2017)The Women: Were the ancientOlympics just for men? https://www. penn. museum/sites/olympics/olympicsexism.

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