

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 55-year-old Riggs says of his 29-year-old opponent: "Billie Jean King is one of the all-time greats. She's a superstar.

But she doesn't stand a chance against me. Women's tennis is so far beneath men's tennis." ¹ As well as reminding us that King beat Riggs in straight sets to prove him wrong, the movie raised a fundamental question debated for decades: should women and men compete against each other in sport? Day to day, women and men work, live and socialise together. Increasingly, women are reaching the top in business, competing directly against men to get those jobs.

In other previously male dominated areas, they are now becoming MPs and even bishops. However, it seems that sport remains the only context in society where we "accept, expect and even defend sex segregation as the status quo". ² The go-to argument sustaining this situation is focused on differences in physical ability between men and women. In my opinion, it is an argument that has been inadequately challenged and examined for identifying 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 exclusively a male domain.

Early sports were based on the physical superiority of one player against another: faster runners, stronger wrestlers, those who could throw further. Ancient societies in which men dominated women would not even consider

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 to include women. Baron de Coubertin, father of the modern Olympics, said: "No matter how toughened a sportswoman may be, her organism is not cut out to sustain certain shocks. Her nerves rule her muscles; nature wanted it that way." ⁴ The 1900 games allowed women's tennis and golf, but no more.

It was not until the 1920s that much greater involvement began. Taking part is no longer an issue: in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, some 45% of the 11,000 athletes competing were women – but, with the exception of equestrianism, still competing only against each other. ⁵ Supporters of the 'physicality' argument would say that it is precisely because of the need for a level playing field, where one can compare like-with-like, that the sexes should continue to compete separately. While male and female gymnasts might perform the same routine on the same mat in front of the same judges, it is arguably easier to choose winners between two men of similar size and shape than between a man and a woman of differing physical appearance. That is before even considering strength and fitness. There is an overwhelming weight of scientific research supporting the thesis that genetic factors alone would allow men to succeed against 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

female athletes begin to train, it is unrealistic to forecast an eventual closing of the female-male gaps in track times or field distances.

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

⁸ The case for looking beyond science and history is based firstly in the belief that the physicality argument is more complex than many imagine and secondly on grounds of continuing unreasonable discrimination and bias.

Male genetic differences, specifically the primary male hormone testosterone, highlight deficiencies which female athletes may want to (illegally) correct in order to perform better in sport. Drug testing revealing high testosterone in sportswomen will usually point to cheating.

There are often exceptions, with South African runner and Olympic gold medallist Caster Semenya a notable anomaly. Semenya’s impressive performance and relatively powerful physique prompted not just drug, but

gender testing. This revealed 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 adding complexity to sports physicality. Discrimination is also a very broad area. At an everyday level, young girls are regularly prevented by their own sports clubs from participating in mixed competition on grounds of the risk of harm to themselves and others, while Tracey Crouch MP was not allowed to join a parliamentary football team because at that time FIFA rules stated that only girls aged 11 and under could play in mixed teams. 10 The sports management industry, whose leadership remains predominantly male, possibly fears a 'dumbing down' of competitive sport for spectators if men play directly against women. Restrained performances from men in the interests of fairness and a level playing field, imposed by new rules for mixed teams, could be seen as dampening excitement in games across a range of sports. It could be argued that at least some players would not be giving their best if restricted by tighter safety and other considerations necessary to match men and women more evenly. Less exciting fixtures would mean fewer spectators and lower income for the industry.

Billy Jean King was able to beat Bobby Riggs for many reasons. 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 men should not face each other on a sports field, Riggs's flawed assessment of King was possibly based

solely on his idea of physical prowess. I believe that there is a good deal of potential for closing the physical ability gap between men and women in many sports where speed, bulk and sheer strength are not the only determinants of success.

Tennis may be one such sport. It has developed essentially from a game, where over the last 150 years men have increasingly used strength as a winning factor: faster serves, greater endurance and sometimes height advantages. Yet it could be argued that there are few male players, even at the top of the game, who could have beaten the Williams sisters in recent years. It is debatable whether these strong, technically brilliant women needed the female game's 'allowance' of playing fewer sets. Also racquet based, badminton's elements of technique and strategy make it accessible to both men and women, who often play as doubles.

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

The rapid development of women's football across the world in recent years demonstrates, in my view, that where there is willingness for sport's ruling bodies to encourage gender diversity, or even simply an opportunity to take part, then there is the beginning of a larger change in mindset about women eventually competing against men. Athletics may well remain gender-

segregated for undeniable reasons of physicality. Very few women rugby players would ever fancy their chances against the All Blacks. However, a combination of good sense and a belief in greater equality within sport could lead some clubs and federations to consider at least trialling mixed participation. Field events such as shooting or archery might present examples where the gap between men and women is already narrow – and could be narrowed further. Governments and other financial backers might consider formal reviews of sports with mixed competition potential.

It is too easy to fall back on historical practices and the ‘physical’ argument.

The common ground between female and male players of sport has by no means been fully explored. ENDS 1498 words NOTES 1. Battle of the Sexes (2017) Fox Searchlight Pictures Dirs: J Dayton, V Faris 2. Milner, AN & Braddock, JH (Praeger, 2016) Sex segregation in sport: why separate is not equal 3. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology (2017) The Women: Were the ancient Olympics just for men? [https://www.penn.museum/sites/olympics/olympicsexism.](https://www.penn.museum/sites/olympics/olympicsexism.shtml)

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