

What's of particular interest, though, is how the crowd—and culture—perceives cholitas. First, they're the main attraction at a male-dominated sporting event in a male-dominated country. The fights are sold to tourists as "cholita wrestling" matches, with little to no mention of the male fighters. Compare this enthusiasm to the groans that, say, a WNBA or women's softball game typically generate.

But, not unlike in roller derby, much of cholita wrestling's appeal is that the sport plays directly into gender norms even as it confronts them. Crowds believe that the women—be they teachers, artists, mothers, sisters—must act a certain way in their "regular" lives, so seeing them flout those roles in a circumscribed space is entertaining. Cholita fighters step into their traditional garb and transcend their daytime roles: juicing oranges on corners, pressing dry cleaning, tending stores. They'll brutally beat a male opponent, then cradle their toddlers after the match. But would I or anyone else care about cholitas if we didn't have expectations as to how they should behave?

Cholita wrestling matches aren't specifically sold to tourists as male-vs.-female fights, but such pairings do occur, as spontaneously as staged athletics allow. Individual cholitas don't necessarily occupy a predetermined "good" or "bad" role in the pairings: Some cholitas might be set up as heroines; others might be spun as villains. Is the sight of a luchador wailing into a cholita a literal blow for equal rights? In the context of the matches, such a thing certainly can't be said to have a purely inspirational, Davida-vs.-Goliath triumphalism. And considering that domestic violence isn't quite as taboo in Bolivia as in many other countries, it could easily be argued that these brutal couplings lean toward exploitative—a safe dramatization of something that's already wrong.

But Bolivian people care about what cholitas do in the ring. The fighters aren't marketed as big-breasted glamazons, as in American female wrestling. Despite the sexism of Bolivian culture, there's little to no sexualization in the ring: When a cholita's skirts turn up, exposing a froth of petticoats, the crowd doesn't holler, whistle, or whoop. Sure, there's some hair pulling, but it's less a voyeuristic tug at feminine weakness than part of the simple mechanics of bloodsport. In a society where sticky bikini calendars mark many citizens' days, months, and years, cholita wrestlers seem to provide a respite from perpetual sexual objectification: They're normal women who break norms, and they put on a damned good show while doing so. What's unclear is whether this bolstered sense of empowerment can extend—for cholitas and their nonfighting sisters—beyond the ring.

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## **SPORTS BAR: THE PROBLEM OF "DEFINING" GENDER IN PROFESSIONAL ATHLETICS** BY ALLISON STEINBERG

When 19-year-old female-identified South African runner Caster Semenya won the 800-meter race at the World Athletic Championships in 2009, it didn't take long before someone questioned whether she deserved it. She was too fast. She was too good. She was too...*male*. Soon enough, an international whispering campaign was on, calling for a "gender test" to determine whether Semenya was the woman she claimed to be.

In the realm of professional sports, there's a long, brutal history of questioning, investigating, labeling, and shunning anyone who doesn't clearly fit the gender binary. And Semenya's case brought several major issues to the forefront, including the question of how professional sports organizations conduct their categorizing and questioning of eligible players. More broadly, it prompted speculation about what makes an athlete outperform others. And finally, it brought up the most radical question of all: Given the huge amount of naturally occurring biological diversity, should we even try to decipher what is "male" and what is "female" in the first place? Or should we overhaul our systems of gender classification to be more realistic and inclusive—starting with professional sports?

The governing bodies of professional athletics use the phrase "gender testing" to describe the process of figuring out whether an athlete is biologically male or female, but what they're actually referring to is sex, not gender. When they aim to "properly" label athletes, they're quite often looking for acceptable levels of agreement between an athlete's gender presentation and her identity. And since the phenomenon of gender testing began, the targets have most often been women who don't look enough like women.

Official gender tests date back to the mid-1960s, when officials in international competitions, responding to Cold War fears of Soviet men posing as female athletes, made all female competitors parade naked before a panel of judges before they were deemed ready to compete. In addition, their chromosomal sex was tested, and in cases where female athletes tested positive for hormonal anomalies like androgen insensitivity syndrome or Turner syndrome, they were barred from competing. And though both the means of testing and the conventional wisdom in the medical community have since grown more questioning and more nuanced—with a recognized half-dozen known variations on "male" and "female"—the most recent Summer Olympics still included a "sex determination laboratory" for any female athletes under suspicion. More sophisticated technology and multiple channels for examination still lead to one of two conclusions: M or F. (Officials no longer investigate all athletes, but retain the right to subject any of them to testing.)

The directive for gender testing came about, in part, after one Hermann Ratjen disguised himself as a woman to

compete in the women's high jump at the Berlin Olympics in 1936. He was revealed as a man after being spotted with facial hair at a train station, and ultimately claimed that he had been pressured by the Nazi Party to claim a medal for Germany. ("For three years I lived the life of a girl. It was most dull," he said.) Polish sprinter Ewa Klobukowska was the first Olympic athlete to "fail" the Olympic committee's gender tests in 1967: Though the official results were never released, it was reported that Klobukowska had "one chromosome too many," and she was barred from further competition.

More recently, the Indian runner Santhi Soundarajan was stripped of the silver medal she won at 2006's Asian Games when she failed a gender test. And German tennis star Sarah Gronert almost quit the game entirely several years back, due to intense pressure from the World Tennis Association. Gronert, born with both male and female genitalia, was the subject of intense criticism. "This is not a woman, it's a man.... No woman has such a technique," insisted the coach of one of her competitors, adding, "She serves like a man. It's very strange." At 19, she underwent surgery to remove the offending male part, but still struggles with opponents and coaches who believe she should be ineligible for women's tennis.

These cases, along with Semenya's, all have one thing in common: All were publicized with scant respect or feeling for the athletes, and all were based on the assumption that a woman competing as well as each did must surely be "hiding" something.

"Gender testing furthers the politically correct illusion that there can be a level playing field in a specific sports event," says Patricia Nell Warren, a longtime writer for the website OutSports and a former amateur athlete. "But there is no such thing in real life." Yet the obsession to test until we determine someone's "true" gender seems to go beyond the simple fear that someone is deliberately posing as the opposite sex. Rather, it prods at the more primal fear that maybe the system we have in place doesn't account for everyone and doesn't properly register the natural diversity that exists.

This question of how we can value this diversity in the realm of athletics has the potential for far-reaching change. Some sports, like wrestling, boxing, and weight lifting, categorize competing athletes by weight and muscle tone: Might we one day adopt this system to organize other sporting events? There wouldn't have to be separate male and female categories, but rather ones based on weight, agility, and ability. It may be that a different paradigm for the classification of athletes would still leave most men competing with other men and women with women because of build and weight, but removing sex as the main determinant for sports categorization would erase the kind of discrimination female athletes like Semenya, Soundarajan, Gronert, and others have suffered for decades. And that

could, in turn, blow the hinges off of millennia of misinformation—in sports, and far beyond.

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### **ACTION FIGURE: A Q&A WITH JOELLE SELLNER** **BY AVRA KOUFFMAN**

Ever wonder who writes action cartoons? The ones where plot summaries read like, "Young hero battles his nemesis"? If you guessed "dudes," for the most part, you're right. Joelle Sellner is a rare female action-cartoon writer: She began her television career with *Mary-Kate & Ashley in Action!*, a show based on the Olsen twins, and has since worked on action cartoons (*Jackie Chan Adventures*, *Teen Titans*, *The Secret Saturdays*), comedy cartoons (*Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi*) and adult anime (*Shin chan*).

Like many of us, Sellner started out with an English/communications degree. Unlike most of us, however, she now makes her living composing lines like "Matter and anti-matter can't be in the same place at the same time...because it destroys the fabric of the universe!"

Writing kids' programming isn't for everyone. "Kids have short attention spans and they're brutally honest," she