

COMMENTARY

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EDITORIAL

New Olympic transgender policy creates inequity issue

The International Olympic Committee ruling this week that transgender athletes will be allowed to compete in the Olympics — starting at this year's games in Athens, Greece — has garnered mixed reactions within the sporting community.

As it should. The decision, while not hasty on the part of the board, requires some analysis to root out the pros and cons of what may seem like a no-brainer.

First, some background: Traditionally, cases of gender change have been few and far between in the Olympics and considered on a case-by-case basis, IOC Medical Commission Chairman Arne Ljungqvist told CNN.

Now that the amount of people receiving gender reassignment has increased, however, Ljungqvist said it was necessary to make a universal set of rules on the subject.

But the hitch was the timing of gender reassignment. Critics of allowing athletes who have had a sex change before puberty — which was the recommendation of the International Association of Athletics Federations in 1990 — argued that testosterone levels before puberty would still affect performance after a male-to-female sex reassignment. This would thus give a physical advantage to a small segment of competitors, critics argued.

Indeed, it's hard to disagree that clear discrepancies exist between male and female performance in certain sports. Take track for instance. A look at male and female track competitors at Oregon, courtesy of the Oregon media guide, shows distinct differences between male and female performance. The fastest time for the 100-meter dash at Hayward Field, for instance, is 9.9 seconds for men and 10.9 seconds for women. Moreover, the world record time for the 100 meters is 9.78 seconds for men and 10.4 for women. The world record for javelin? A whopping 323.1 feet for men and 234.8 feet for women. The list goes on.

So clearly the unfair advantage concerns are valid. And while it's important in today's society to promote equality, even in competitive sports, any factors that may give an unfair advantage in such an important event as the Olympics should be rejected.

But therein lies the can of worms. If a supposed male surgically receives female body parts, claiming he is a female trapped in a man's body, would that make the person a female according to Olympics standards? Would that then count as an unfair advantage or just simple biology?

The board clarified a few of these problems with a strict set of guidelines for allowing athletes who had sex reassignment after puberty to compete. For instance, a man or woman couldn't simply claim he or she was the other gender; instead, the athlete must have completed "surgical changes ... including external genitalia changes and removal of gonads."

Furthermore, the athlete's gender must be legally recognized, and the athlete must have undergone hormone therapy "long enough to minimize any gender-related advantages in sports competitions, a period that must be at least two years after gonadectomy."

Beyond the importance of equality and the perceived competitive disadvantages, the real test of the new policy will take place when it actually becomes an issue at the Olympics. As it stands now, the decision has received little media attention. We would just hope that any impending controversy doesn't mar the spirit of the games.

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Lessons in DEMOCRACY

As Americans fight and die to bring democracy to the Middle East — at least that's what they tell us we're doing over there — I think America's leaders and the American people should pay more attention to the world's largest democracy: India. We just might learn a thing or two.

Last week the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party suffered a shocking defeat at the hands of the Congress party, led by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi. Most pundits predicted the incumbent, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, would coast to an easy victory. They did not figure on the large turnout of poor voters who have become disillusioned by the economic policies of the BJP.

In many ways the voters in India faced a similar decision to the one we will be facing in November. They had to decide between the religious fundamentalism of the BJP and the secularism of the Congress party.

We, too, will have to decide between a George W. Bush government that bases its abortion, gay marriage and church-state separation policies on religious emotion rather than sound science, and a John Kerry government that will embrace secularism and rationalism.

The Indian people had to decide whether to vote for a nuclear bomb fetishist like Vajpayee, who after only seven weeks in office tested five nuclear devices under the deserts of Rajasthan and set off a nuclear arms race with Pakistan, or to vote for the party that will fight to end nuclear proliferation.

America has to vote either for an incumbent hellbent on developing usable nuclear weapons or a candidate determined to stop these programs.



David Jagernauth
Critical mass

The Indian people had to decide between the measured economic policies of the Congress party and the reckless globalization and privatization of the BJP, which has resulted in the enrichment of a few but the continued impoverishment of the masses.

Kerry is advocating tax cuts for the middle class and a balanced budget while Bush has given us tax cuts for the rich, unemployment, jobs shipped overseas and a massive federal debt.

The people of India have spoken. I can only hope that the American people show the same wisdom and kick our Christian-nationalist administration out of the White House.

There is a second lesson we can learn from India. On Tuesday, Sonia Gandhi told the Congress party that she would not be India's next prime minister.

"The post of prime minister has not been my aim," she said. "I was always certain that if ever I found myself in the position I am in today, I would follow my inner voice. I humbly decline the post."

Sonia Gandhi turned down the highest office in India in order to bring an end to the debate about whether a foreign-born citizen should lead the coun-

try. She was born in an Italian village to a Roman Catholic family 57 years ago. She is the widow of past Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was assassinated in 1991. The debate over Gandhi's nationality was violently dividing the subcontinent and sending the stock market into a nosedive.

"My responsibility at this critical time is to provide India with a secular government that is strong and stable," Gandhi said. "Power in itself has never attracted me, nor has position been my goal."

Through her selfless act she has united India. Those on all sides of the political and religious divide are praising her for her decision. The Indian markets have rebounded. A relative calm has been restored.

Our politicians could learn from Sonia Gandhi. We are more divided and polarized in this country than any time in recent history. We are at a critical time. The United States needs uniting. But can you imagine Bush saying he humbly declines the office of the presidency for the good of the country? Can you imagine a Republican like John McCain joining the Kerry ticket as vice president in order to unite the red and blue across this nation?

No. Our politicians are too boastful for that. They are power hungry and interested more in keeping their jobs than doing the will of the people. I don't know if we have many Sonia Gandhis left in public service, not here, not around the world.

Contact the columnist at davidjagernauth@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.