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Babe

Suppose kindergarten teachers began lessons: *Girls and boys, gender is complicated.*

On September 28, 2010 a team of four athletes broke the world record for fastest relay in stilettos. They called themselves the Pinkettes. The Australian Associated Press write-up refers to the athletes alternately as “four glamorous girls” and the “leggy quartet.” The competition was sponsored by Venus Embrace Razors, and all competitors were required to have heels of at least three inches—and, of course, smooth legs.

Babe Didrikson won gold at the 1932 Olympics in the 80-meter hurdles and the javelin. With cropped hair and a strong jaw, she was an androgynous nineteen-year-old. Sportswriters called her a tomboy, an Amazon; others called her a freak.

In 1932, the *New York Times* ran three paragraphs about Babe Didrikson purchasing a pink hat.

Now we have pink baseball caps for every major league team. So you can easily enjoy both the wonderful world of sports and the safety of unquestioned femininity. An authentic replica jersey says “one of the boys.” Pink says “woman” first, later asks who we are cheering for.

Being on the right team has always been a high-stakes game. Are you familiar with the following phrases? She’s on our team. He plays for both teams.

“Pink hat” has become a disparaging term for Red Sox fans who jumped on board once the team started winning.

In our sixth grade co-ed soccer league, all the boys were afraid of a player a year younger but already better than most of us. They called her Big Amy. Whenever she dribbled down the field on a breakaway, I’d have to be the one to chase her down. The other defensive players on my team, all boys, wouldn’t go near her, said it was her size they were afraid of.

All the little girls play soccer now. You can buy your daughter a sparkly pink “Soccer Princess” t-shirt or put a “Softball Diva” sticker on your minivan. In each carefully constructed phrase the masculine and feminine cancel each other out leaving a lesbian quotient of zero.

In response to Babe Didrikson’s Olympic success, flyers were posted on school bulletin boards warning girls that having muscles would make them undesirable.

In eighth grade I grew my hair out from the boy-short cut I’d had since I was five. (Despite a lack of public service announcements.)

When asked if there was anything she didn’t play, Babe famously answered, “I don’t play dolls.”

When my sister Pam was a sophomore, there were only two out varsity athletes in her entire college, out of over 1,000 student-athletes. (Two water polo players—one male and one female. They would have made a cute couple.) I know this because I went to a panel discussion on the

issue. We went because Pam's softball coach, one of the only out lesbian softball coaches in the NCAA, was speaking. My sister didn't start dating women until she quit softball senior year and joined the cycling team.

The crew team I rowed for in college was straight when I joined freshman year. Only in retrospect could we all realize how gay we were when the gayest freshman class ever showed up two years later. I was impressed. I didn't even know anyone who was out in high school, and these girls even out-gayed the rugby team. Upperclassmen started dating freshmen; juniors came out of the closet. And all the new crew girls had a crush on Karen. Apparently I wasn't the only one awed by her forearms, the fact that she could pull a 2k on the erg in under seven minutes. It made me feel better to write on the whiteboard on her door across the hall: *The freshmen want to have your babies.*

Pam's softball team was aggressively heterosexual, only people don't say that when straight people talk about sex all the time. I can be accused of shoving my sexuality in people's faces when I make innocuous statements like: *My girlfriend and I went grocery shopping yesterday. I'm taking my girlfriend out to dinner for her birthday tomorrow night. My girlfriend and I just got a new toaster for meeting our yearly recruitment quota.*

One of my coming out stories: My mom picked me up from college to help me move out of my dorm after graduation. The drive home was an hour and a half, and we stopped with about fifteen minutes to go to eat dinner at an Italian restaurant. Halfway through our pasta, Mom asked me

what it said on my visor. (I was wearing a visor. I'm a lesbian.) I said, "It says 'Camp Arowhon.' It's the camp Meg worked at. Actually, we're dating." No joke, no transition.

I didn't tell my dad until the end of the summer. We were watching the Olympics on TV when I said, "There's something I have to tell you." This time I was the one who started crying.

I'd like to think I chose a college for a reason other than that Jessica Smith told me her older sister wanted to go there but her mom said there were too many lesbians.

Senior year, Karen was telling me that at the party she went to the night before, it worked out this way: heteros talking out on the porch, queers inside. She didn't use these words, and I wouldn't have either. Back then we said straight and gay, not comfortable enough to reclaim what I barely claimed. What she didn't claim at all, and I never asked.

Karen replied to an email the next day. Parenthetical postscript: *and by the way, since I know you are DYING to know, I would have been on the porch.*

Six years later, we start dating.

The thing is, this doesn't surprise me. Queers grow up reading subtexts.

It is said Babe had few, if any, idols. Although she once said Amelia Earhart had "the most beautiful hands she'd ever seen."

What do you call a lesbian with long nails? Single.

Two photos show Babe before and after: Just before she throws the javelin, just after she has hit a golf ball.



Javelin is held in front of her face; golf club rests behind her head. Both strike a forty-five degree angle, giving the photos a reference point, an uneasy congruency.

Throwing the javelin, her right leg flexed, left leg practically a straight line from hip to toe, she leans back. Torso forms right angles with her right quad and left bicep. She points with her left arm fully extended, 180 degrees, forearm tensed, thumb and forefinger cocked as if shooting skyward. Throwing arm bent slightly at the elbow, perpendicular to her neck, taut. Chin juts, mouth set in concentration. Cut unapologetically short, even her hair points. (In the poor resolution of the black & white photo, it looks like an anachronistic fauxhawk.)

Bare ankles, bare arms, bare legs. Babe wears a track uniform, white shorts and a sleeveless top. Muscles exposed. Were she to stand instead with her hands by her side, the hem of her shorts would not reach her fingertips. Javelin thrower, straight shooter.

Potential energy, she does not curve. She snaps.



Golfing, she poses, all sharp lines covered. Arms, in long sleeves, seem softer; we see the folds of her sweater. The only muscles we see strain are in her face, a forced smile. Left foot turns in. Long skirt covers her calves, only a few inches of shin exposed between socks and hem. Sweater flares out at her hips. Pockets at chest and waist emphasize curves. Her hair, to her shoulders, now suggests a word like “flounce.”

The moment is staged, golf club swung behind her head—sport is no longer in the foreground.

We see her face instead, rounder; her chin does not jut. Now she swings in an arc. Even the golf club, blunt, does not have the sharp tip of the javelin.

Before, Babe is all angles. After, she may well be. We can’t see.

The field hockey team used to wear their uniforms to school on game days—polo shirts and plaid skirts. On the soccer team, we sometimes wore shirts and ties, like the guys’ team had to for all their away games. We challenged the field hockey team to a game of flag football. It was our only victory of the season.

When I was a freshman on the JV basketball team, the varsity captains decided that we all had to wear skirts to school on days when we had home games. No dress pants. We could understand the dressing up, but not the mandatory skirts. Our coach wouldn't back us up; if we didn't wear a skirt, we'd be benched. The next day, we all wore skirts over our warm-up pants and tie-dyed t-shirts.

When we were on the varsity team a few years later, we tried to come up with more creative ideas for game day spirit. Once we thought it would be funny to dress up as our coach—he wore bowties. An easy costume: khaki pants, a button-down shirt and a clip-on bowtie. A few of the underclassmen refused—they would only wear the bowties if we wore them with skirts. In the compromise, we looked like flight attendants.

Babe had a habit of referring to overly feminine things as “sissy.”

Used to be self-conscious about the way I sat on the bench during basketball games. Like it wasn't athletic (read: masculine) enough. Like crossing my legs made me look gay, effeminate instead of feminine. Does this make sense?

I'm afraid of public restrooms. I'm not a germophobe; I'm androgynous.

Most of the time when I'm in the women's room, people think I'm in the wrong bathroom. Actually, they think they are in the wrong bathroom. If I had a nickel for every time a

woman saw me at the sink and then walked back outside to check the sign on the door, I could buy a really fancy pink bow.

You would think I'd have a comeback by now, not that I'd have much opportunity to use it. While I do get the occasional *Dude, this is the women's room* from the drunk girl swaying over the sink, mostly it's just stares and doubletakes. Judging by how often people look me up and down on my way to the stalls, it seems as though the one thing soccer moms, grandmothers, and eight-year-old girls can agree on is that I am unbelievably attractive.

But the real problem is not that I look too masculine to feel comfortable in the women's room—it's that I don't look feminine enough to use the men's room. I realize this is counterintuitive, but think about it this way: You're in a gas station and there are two bathrooms—both locked single toilets, but labeled “Men” and “Women” anyway, just so our society doesn't crumble—and there are two or three women in line but the men's room is open. If I were confident that I would be seen simply as a woman asserting her right to pee in the empty, arbitrarily labeled men's room, I wouldn't hesitate. But I am unsure of what I would look like. A man? A woman? A woman that looks like a man? A woman that looks like a man that looks like a woman overthinking her gender presentation?

I don't know if this obnoxious tendency to overanalyze is the egg or the chicken of the fact that I am forced to think about my gender identity at least seven times a day. (I have a small bladder.)

But it's hard not to obsess about gender in our society. Sometimes just for fun I'll go on a search for that archetypal man and woman. I see signs for them everywhere—in restaurants, malls, airports—square shouldered and lacking extremities. But I never find them. Following the signs, I always end up at a restroom instead. Am I the only one who thinks it would make more sense to represent the concept of "bathroom" with a picture of a toilet?

In our culture the actual function of the room is secondary to how we sort ourselves when we get there. So until evolution starts selecting for a gender binary, sorting us neatly into those who wear skirts at 45-degree angles and those who appear to wear no pants at all, we need to find a better way to accommodate everyone.

We should add a third restroom option—"Men," "Women," and "Freaks." I can't take credit for this solution as I stole it from an angry homophobic blogger. But really, I would love to use that restroom. And you know it would be only a matter of time before all the women would start using it just to avoid the lines. Then I would finally have my chance to look at them as they're washing their hands, gasp audibly, then glance back at the clearly-marked door before announcing in a loud voice, "I thought this was the Freaks' Room."

In locker rooms, I used to always change the same way I would on the team bus or in the parking lot after a game. Layer on a jersey, sports bra, before removing the clothes underneath. Pull on shorts quickly, hiding behind the open door of my locker. What I haven't outgrown is the way I avoid looking at other women in changing rooms. Used to be afraid that my gaze, not too long but too awkwardly averted, would give me away. Now I fear that others can easily read my appearance, might read into my eye contact something I don't intend.

Heteronormative. Once I felt the need to justify using an academic term here, it became easier to erase it instead. And that just goes to show how it works.

After her basketball career and her track and field success and before she started golfing, Babe played some exhibition games with the House of David baseball team. All the men on the team, affiliated with a religious commune, wore beards. When a female spectator asked her, "Where are your whiskers?" She replied, "I'm sitting on 'em, sister, just like you are."

My professor jokes that the difference between men and women is that men never change the way they dress. ("We still wear the same thing we did when we were eight," he says, "Jeans and a t-shirt."). When he makes this comment, I am literally wearing jeans and a t-shirt and a hooded sweatshirt I've had since high school. This is not to point out that we don't fit in such easy boxes, but to ask who is erased in order to maintain them. I recognize my privilege—not everywhere is this erasing figurative, physically nonviolent.

Last year, my friend's department formed a committee and decided to make the second-floor single stall bathroom in their building gender-neutral. The hard part was figuring out what to put on the sign. It seemed too difficult to name all the people that this restroom served without inadvertently leaving someone out. I suggested they label it "Restroom."

In my friend's dorm room, trying on her new leather boots, high-heeled, I felt for the first time like I was doing drag. You know that we all perform gender, right?

In her first major golf tournament, the 1935 Texas state championship, Babe beat a former state champion on the 36th hole to take the title. Newspapers reported: "Staging a sensational finish, the irrepressible Babe Didrikson Saturday rudely upset the polite circles of women's golf in Texas by defeating the veteran Mrs. Dan Chandler of Dallas." Socialite Peggy Chandler had targeted Babe before the match, saying, "We really don't need any truck driver's daughters in this tournament." Babe's father was a dockworker, and of course that must have been Mrs. Dan Chandler's point exactly. Or one of them, at least.

A photo of target practice. Amelia Earhart is looking at the camera warily, a pistol dangles loose in her right hand, her finger above the trigger. Babe looks down, lining up her hands on the bow and arrow. This photo did not run in the press; they did not know each other well, a biographer comments. Both women have short hair, long skirts. I want to say their shoes look sensible, but they're wearing heels.

Subtexts are easy to create, nearly impossible to control. I don't have to rewrite history, just introduce doubt into the text.

I have a friend who is even more of a lesbian stereotype than I am. Wears plaid shirts and Carhartts; dates women exclusively (would never even think of dating a man); loves dogs; works as a diesel mechanic; used to be an outdoor educator; listens to female singer-songwriters; processes everything, often over-processes relationships before they even happen; is a feminist activist—started a group to fight domestic violence at his college.

Babe, in a sweater and wool skirt, shakes hands with George Zaharias. He's a wrestler, a large man—his white shirt with striped tie takes up three-quarters of the photo. Babe in profile, turning toward him. Her left hand, gloved, curled around her golf club, leans on her stomach; George's fedora in hand, he holds his club with an index finger. The sun is behind Babe—you can see her shadow on George's right breast.

This photo she captioned: *I'd had several boy friends as a youngster, but when I met George Zaharias at the '38 Los Angeles Open, I knew this was IT. Less than a year later we were married in St. Louis.* It is indisputable that Babe had many “boy friends”; she played football and baseball with them past any acceptable cutoff age for tomboy behavior. In a single sentence she recasts the story of her adolescence. Her speech always sounds casual, but it is never accidental. While women often refer to their non-romantic female friends as “girlfriends,” Babe does not use this term to talk about the woman who kept her company in later years, when George was often out on the road.

Buddy was the word she used. Have you ever played the pronoun game?

Babe studied femininity like a game. Once she realized that's what it was. Gender was the only sport that didn't come naturally to her.

Hitting golf balls until her hands bled. Painting her nails for the cameras.

After I moved to Seattle, I joined a club rugby team. A few weeks later, I was the fifth wheel in a car with two couples, heading to Portland for a game. An overwhelming majority of the team was gay, but only a few of us had short hair. Somehow we all ended up in the same car. Peggy's driving, her girlfriend Scout sitting shotgun, and I was in the back with Jen and Kristina.

We stopped at a rest stop. I was first into the bathroom, and there was only one woman in line. A stall opened up, but she didn't go for it. So I looked at her, doing that "your turn" deferential eye contact thing, thinking maybe she hadn't seen it. She made no move towards the stall, and instead looked at me, panicked.

Now this happens to me all the time, but usually they look past me and see the feminine faces behind me, reassured that I am the one who is out of place. Apparently Scout, Jen, and Kristina did not serve this purpose. Not only that, but one of the women in the stalls

was probably 6'2" with short hair and an angular jaw. You could see her above the door. Somehow the restroom was now filled with us and people who looked like us.

"Am I in the men's room?"

"We're all women," Scout said. An old woman walked slowly out of one of the stalls. She put a hand on Peggy's arm. "I think you're very pretty."

I know I'm not pretty but I do try to be graceful, Babe used to say. In later years, she would not discuss her track and field days. Did not display her Olympic medals.

In a retrospective written after Babe's death from cancer at forty-two, sportswriter Paul Gallico described the first time he met her: "She was then a rawhide kid of 18 with short-cut, sand-colored hair, a well-defined Adam's apple and a faint down on her upper lip." A woman's facial hair becomes darker, more noticeable with age. Where are your whiskers?

In later years, a young golfer named Betty Dodd lived with Babe and George. When Babe fell ill, Dodd gave her shots of Demerol, massaged her foot when it was the only thing that could stop the pain of the sciatic nerve, irrigated her colostomy. Dodd, described by the press as a "close friend and golf companion."

My sister's ex-girlfriend had a magnet on her refrigerator: "I used to be a tomboy, now I'm a full-grown lesbian." At my Grandpa's wake, my aunts told Amy how cute her short, spiky haircut was. How nice it was that she came to the wake, how she was such a good friend to Pam.

For Babe to even come out publicly as a cancer patient back then was courageous. In the fifties, cancer was not openly discussed. Hard to imagine today with yellow wristbands and pink hats and razor companies sponsoring stiletto races to raise money for breast cancer foundations.

In her autobiography, Babe refers to Betty Dodd as "a wonderful girl who stuck to me through the roughest going." Stuck to.

Suppose I were to fixate on a single preposition. Suppose that, trying to read this subtext, I became stuck. Stuck on, stuck to, but not stuck with. Prepositions locate in time and space, indicate relationships. Suppose I tried to read an entire history in one word.

She asked Dodd not to go to her funeral. The last time she saw her was eleven days before she died.

Billie Jean

I did a report on Billie Jean King in fourth grade. Was jealous she had a boy's name. Read about how she beat Bobby Riggs in an exhibition tennis match called the Battle of the Sexes. Learned what a male chauvinist was.



I was a shy, awkward girl with a boy's haircut.

This isn't a picture of me. I didn't wear glasses. I still don't. This photo is Billie Jean King, though at the time she was still Billie Jean Moffitt. She's smiling because she just won women's singles at Wimbledon for the second time in 1967. That was my haircut, though.

Short brown hair. I hated skirts. I even hated pants without pockets. I remember my mom once made me wear a pair of pocketless pants when we went out to dinner, and I refused to leave the house until I made my own pockets by stapling pieces of construction paper together.

The first time I almost cried over a haircut was in fifth grade. My aunt had been cutting my hair since I could remember, always short. A "boy's regulation" my mom called it. But this time

Aunt Joan feathered it around the ears, kept it a little longer all around. Still boy short, but somehow more feminine. I hated it.

I

“It’s easier to change attitudes through sports. Sports are a visual example of what the world could be.”



I didn’t know that Billie Jean was not the first woman to play Riggs. She had initially declined his challenge, and he had instead played Margaret Court, the number one women’s singles player at the time. This original match was later referred to as the Mother’s Day Massacre.

Riggs trained hard for this match against Court in May 1973—a newspaper headline read “No Booze, No Broads, Vows Bobby.” He was quoted saying, “Margaret is an even-money bet. She plays like a man and I play like a woman.”

Court lost to Riggs—6-2, 6-1 in only 57 minutes—a complete blowout. Not a great showing for the top player in women’s tennis. Riggs was a former Wimbledon champion, with the emphasis on former; he had won men’s singles in 1939.

After beating Court, Riggs said, “Now I want King bad. I’ll play her on clay, grass, wood, cement, or roller skates. We got to keep this sex thing going. I’m a woman specialist now.”

Bobby Riggs was a hustler. A *60 Minutes* special shows him playing tennis against Paul Anka. He is holding a valise in one hand and there are eight chairs lined up on his side of the court. The next shot shows him flipping playing cards into a wastebasket, one after the other after the other. The camera cuts from Bobby playing Joe Louis in golf, shooting free throws underhand, playing poker against Art Tilden—he’s chattering the whole time, talking like a used car salesman.

Before the match, Billie Jean King went on a retreat to South Carolina to train; Bobby partied with Playboy bunnies at his friend’s mansion.

“I beat Margaret Court, and she can kill Billie Jean King anytime she wants. I’ll hammer her. I don’t need to practice for Billie Jean King. She’s terrible. She’s got no forehand. She slices the ball and comes to the net; I’ll lob it over her head. No problem.”

King was 29; Riggs was 55, her father’s age.



Billie Jean King fought for equal pay for women on the tennis circuit; Bobby Riggs demanded greater compensation for the senior tour. Both craved attention, celebrity.

Billie Jean King was a fireman's daughter. Bobby Riggs, a preacher's kid. Both were taught to play by women. Both were too poor to play tennis. Billie Jean King started playing by taking the free group lessons offered at the public park.

In her first tennis tournament, Billie Jean was pulled out of the group photo because she was wearing white shorts her mom had made, not white tennis skirts like all the other girls.



King over Riggs: 6-4, 6-3, 6-3.

An article in *The New York Times* reported, "Mrs. King squashed Riggs with tools synonymous with men's tennis, the serve and volley. She beat Bobby to the ball, dominated the net and ran him around the baseline to the point of near exhaustion in the third set, when he suffered hand cramps and trailed, 2-4."

Billie Jean King wore new blue suede Adidas sneakers for the match. She knew the power of television, the power of images.



The match was a spectacle. The organizers arranged for shirtless men to carry King into the stadium on a gaudily decorated litter. She met Riggs at center court and he presented her with a two-foot Sugar Daddy; she handed him a pig, an actual live piglet. As King walked out to take the court, sportscaster Howard Cosell said, “Sometimes you get the feeling that if she ever let down her hair to her shoulders and took off her glasses, you’d have someone vying for a Hollywood screen test.”

One of King’s early supporters, a New Jersey businessman named Frank Brennan, once told her, “You’ll be a good athlete, Billie Jean, because you’re ugly.”

The second time I almost cried over a haircut I was twenty-one. I got home from Supercuts and realized I looked like a lesbian. At that point I was a lesbian, but there was something I can’t describe that upset me. In high school, I didn’t realize that some people might be able to read my appearance—my constant ponytail and my cargo pants—before I did. Now my hair was too short to pull back into a ponytail. I put on a visor to cover up the haircut but of course that only made it worse.

When you’re combating a stereotype, it’s a no-win. King had to beat Riggs just to not confirm that women were inferior. She knew that men’s tennis would not be hurt if Riggs lost; he had nothing to lose.

30,492 fans. The largest crowd to ever watch a tennis match live, plus millions of television viewers across the country.

Later, Billie Jean said, “On that night, I think, the game of tennis finally got kicked out of the country clubs forever and into the world of real sports, where everybody could see it.”

Before the match, a fellow women’s tennis player, Chris Evert, 19, predicted Riggs would come out on top. She said, “I saw Bobby beat Margaret, and I think he’s a really tough player.”

To prepare for the match with Riggs, Billie Jean King got a sensible haircut—short, no bangs in her face. She had enough trouble seeing with her 20/400 vision.

A New York Times article by Grace Lichtenstein:

Perhaps the calmest person in the house throughout the match was a 25-year-old pale, willowy blonde, a former hairdresser from Beverly Hills, Calif. She sat on the sidelines in a flowered halter dress next to Billie Jean, when the player rested.

She was Marilyn Barnett, Mrs. King's secretary, who earlier in the day had said that she had “good vibrations.” And so, for the big event, she wore a dress that was brown and blue. “In yoga,” she said in explanation, “brown stands for money and blue stands for spirit.”

You know when you’re growing out your hair from a short cut, and it looks super awkward for a while? That was the haircut I kept getting towards the end of college—the awkward in-between cut. Too afraid to cut it in an actual short style, I kept seeing how short I could go while telling hairdressers to “keep it all one length.” This, to me, was the arbitrary line between a men’s and a women’s haircut.

During winter break of junior year, I went to the salon in my hometown. As I started to explain what I wanted, the hairdresser, who had graduated from my high school, interrupted to reassure me she understood what I was trying to say: “Right, you want it short, but you don’t want to look butch.”

II

“This is a culmination of a lifetime in sport. Tennis has always been reserved for the rich, the white, the males—and I’ve always pledged to change all that. There’s still a lot to be done, but this is certainly a high point.”

The Battle of the Sexes was billed as the “Libber vs. Lobber.”

Riggs was the lobber, known for returning shots with soft lobs in an attempt to unsettle his opponents. King was a proponent of women’s liberation, and since the press called the movement “women’s lib,” she was a libber instead of a liberator.

Another gem from Riggs: “Women who can, do. Women who can’t become feminists.”

Billie Jean Moffitt married Larry King on September 17, 1965. She often credits Larry as the one who got her involved in feminism. Or at least opened her eyes to the inequalities. Not that they were hard to see, even with her 20/400 vision: Billie Jean paid her way through college while Larry attended Cal State on a tennis scholarship. He was given a full ride as the number seven player on team. Though she had already won a Wimbledon doubles title, Billie Jean didn’t get a cent towards her education.

There was no women’s professional tennis tour, but amateurs were allowed to compete for money in tournaments like US Open and Wimbledon. Tournament sponsors would often pay top women players under the table to ensure that they would be competing—and drawing crowds.

Since there was no women’s tennis circuit, these players would have to compete at men’s tournaments, usually for a small fraction of the prize money offered men. It was not uncommon for the women’s purse to be less than one-eighth of what the men were competing for.

Billie Jean took on the role of organizer and led eight other top women players to break off from the United States Lawn Tennis Association to form their own professional tour, signing \$1 contracts to play for a small event in Texas rather than accepting the unequal prize money. The

women, called the “Original 9,” were sponsored by Virginia Slims, a cigarette company trying to market to women with the slogan, “You’ve come a long way, baby.”

Of course, this newly formed tennis tour was called the “women’s lib”—the press seemed to jump at any chance to play on “women’s lib.” They must have been proud of themselves for coming up with a clever way to make the fight for women’s rights sound cute, trivial, glib.

Besides Billie Jean, Rosie Casals and a few other players, most of the women on the tour were not political, didn’t see connections between tennis and the larger world. And sports never became a focus of the feminist movement. Most of the second-wave feminists were not athletes, and many saw sports as a remnant of the patriarchy.

Gloria Steinem: “Billie, this is about politics.”

Billie Jean King: “Gloria, *we are* politics.”

In 1973 Betty Friedan suggested that lesbians had been sent by the CIA to infiltrate, and undermine, the feminist movement.

Lesbian. I always figured I disliked the word because it sounded like a disease. But it’s also because lesbian is a noun, not an easy adjective. You can’t say, “I’m lesbian” the way you can casually say, “I’m gay.” (Compare saying “I’m *a* gay.”) You have to say, “I’m *a* lesbian.” Sure, it is possible to use it as an adjective—you can say “lesbian actress,” if the need to use that phrase ever arises. But you can’t say, “I’m lesbian” in a way that distinguishes it sonically from “I’m a lesbian.”

Being gay sounds fun, but homosexuality and lesbianism sound communicable.

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed *homosexuality* from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

Billie Jean King was born into a conservative California family in 1943. She was named after her father Bill, in case he didn't come home from World War II. She grew up playing football in neighborhood games. She wanted to be a professional baseball player or a Green Bay Packer.

Before she agreed to play Bobby Riggs, Billie Jean King had only seen the highlights of the Mother's Day Massacre, not the whole tape. When she watched it to prepare for her own match, she was struck by a few seconds of footage at the beginning. "That's where Court lost it," Billie said. In those opening moments when Bobby presented Margaret with roses, and she accepted them with a curtsy.

In 1972, Title IX was passed.

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

Vaguely worded, it didn't mention athletics. Though it was not intended to promote equal access to sports, it became inextricably linked to the fight.

In 1974, Billie Jean capitalized on her fame and the momentum of women's tennis to start three projects: the Women's Sports Foundation, World Team Tennis (a league where women and men played as teammates) and *womenSports* magazine.

womenSports folded in 1978. In an early issue, jockey Mary Bacon was quoted saying, "What woman reads about other women unless she's queer?"

The third time I felt like crying over a haircut, I actually did. I was twenty-two, and I had gone in to get a trim. A few months before, I had my hair cut short for the first time in years. Though I went back to the same salon, the less-talented stylist couldn't replicate the pixie cut. Cutting the sides too short, she made me look like a nine-year-old boy. I walked the twenty blocks home, holding back tears and wondering why I cared so much about a bad haircut.



In 1975, King lost her #1 ranking to her twenty-one-year-old rival, Chris Evert. Or, as the press called her, “Chrissie,” “America’s Sweetheart.” While some of the other players had been less than welcoming to Chris when she started on the tour at age sixteen, Billie Jean had always made an effort to reach out. As a leader, she recognized that photogenic, girl-next-door Chris was just what the women’s tour needed.

While Billie Jean’s haircut is different in almost every photo I find, Chris Evert always looks the same—long blond hair, straight.

Billie Jean notes that the “unfortunate-for-me-aspect of Chris’s arrival on the scene was that it encouraged the press to stereotype me all the more.”

“I was never described in ways that related to the female gender. No code words like ‘cute’ or ‘elegant’ were ever dragged up for Billie Jean. And the classic example: I always wore lots of jewelry on the court. I mean, anybody could see that. But nobody in the press ever wrote about the jewelry I had on, because that contradicted the tough broad image they had decided on. But as soon as Chris began playing, if she so much as had earrings on, that was sure to be mentioned in everybody’s story. That’s how the press pegs you.”

In 1973, Billie Jean is interviewed by James Day on his public television talk show, “Day at Night.” He is a balding man with glasses, and he’s wearing a suit and bowtie. Though he appears amiable, he constantly interrupts her as she’s talking.

I think we should get rid of the words feminine and masculine.

Do you?

Yes, we should because too often it makes children try to act a certain way instead of feeling and doing what really is right for them. And it just kills me to see some girls be passive when in reality they’re not a passive, you know, a passive person. And also what happens to the boy who isn’t a super-jock, you know? Who doesn’t go out and run a 100-yard dash in x amount of seconds, and he likes to sit at home and read. Or sit at home and cook. You know, that’s when the family gets uptight and they start yelling at him, so

I'm hoping that through, well I call it the women's movement, women's liberation, that it's going to help both not to stereotype people, stop . . .

But you'd still hope for a, obviously hope for a difference and a maintenance of a difference between masculine and feminine, even though there would be more gradations.

Well, if you can tell me exactly what equals masculine and what equals feminine, that would be great.

In 1976, the Yale women's crew team protested the lack of facilities for female rowers. While the men's crew team had a boathouse, the women did not even have a space to change. After practice, they had to wait for the bus in wet practice clothes while the men showered in the locker room before the ride back to campus.

With a reporter from *The New York Times* watching, the rowers walked into the athletic director's office, and they stripped off their shirts. TITLE IX was written in blue marker across their backs and chests.

III

*"It was so complicated, and one morning I woke up, and where was I?
I was in another woman's bed."*

The hardest to learn was the least complicated.

In May 1972, Billie Jean King went to a salon in Beverly Hills where many female tennis players got their hair cut. Her stylist was Marilyn Barnett, long blond hair, hippie, who was living with a boyfriend at the time. They later ran into each other at a party thrown by a mutual friend.

Small world. And in certain scenes, it's even smaller.

"Marilyn struck me as a nice person, but she made more of an initial impression on me for the good job she did on my hair," Billie Jean recalled.

At the party, though, they hit it off.

What does a lesbian bring to the second date?¹

On the 1973-74 tour, Billie Jean paid Marilyn to travel as her personal assistant. They often stayed in the same hotel suite while Larry had his own room down the hall. Larry explained it by saying he was always on the phone, making calls to promoters and sponsors, and that Billie Jean needed her rest.

Orientation is an interesting metaphor. Like orienteering, it is about seeking. You only have to search for an identity if the one you've been given doesn't fit. I wonder how many campus outdoor groups still call themselves Outing Clubs.

Elton John and Billie Jean King had a mutual admiration, and they became good friends. Both were shy, private people who were becoming celebrities when they met in 1973. Both were still in the closet—Elton came out in a 1976 *Rolling Stone* article and Billie Jean was outed five years after that.

Billie Jean didn't hide her struggles with identity and sexuality from her husband, and she asked for a divorce for the first time in 1969. But Larry never saw these issues as a reason to break up—they were married. Their marriage was unconventional; Larry played the husband-promoter role working full-time to promote the women's tennis tour. He signed autographs, "Mr. Billie Jean King."

King's conservative parents found out that she had an abortion when her name appeared on a list in *Ms*. The magazine had sent a petition to prominent women asking for the signatures of any who had had an abortion. She became an accidental champion for women's reproductive rights.

For a long time, Billie Jean denied having seen the letter, saying Larry had written her name in. In other stories, she suggests she had signed the petition herself after Larry convinced her, or that

¹ A UHaul

she signed thinking it was just a way to show her support, not a declaration that she had an abortion herself.

Billie Jean developed ulcers from stress. She felt the entire future of women's tennis riding on her shoulders. Coming out as a lesbian was not an option.

Describing her relationship with Marilyn, she says, "It was all so easy and uncomplicated with her, so different from the rest of my life. She didn't even know anything about sports."

An interviewer for *Playboy* in 1975 asked, "You're not a lesbian yourself, then?" She replied, "My sex life is no one's business, but if I don't answer your question, people will think I have something to hide, so I'm in a bind. I'm damned if I answer your question and damned if I don't, but I'll give you the answer: no, I'm not a lesbian. That's not even in the ball park for me."

Sports give us so many metaphors for life. A locker is a small closet with a lock on it.

In the hyper-masculine arena of athletics, men are free to express emotions that they must censor in other places. Women, on the other hand, are reined in on both sides. Caught between "women are weak" and "strong women are lesbians," there is little ground for women athletes to stand on to combat either stereotype.

Billie Jean was famous for her temper on the court. The tension between needing to be and needing to appear not to be at the same time. *There's no crying in baseball*. Yet men find that the athletic realm is the one place where it's acceptable to tear up with emotion. Or slap each other on the ass.

Or as Billie Jean puts it, "Male athletes are expected to grab each other, jump in each other's arms, slap each other on the bahooa, rejoice with each other; but if women athletes show anything more than a handshake for one another, that's further proof they're all three-dollar bills."



Always portrayed as outspoken, brash, tough, she says, “I never felt so soft and feminine in all my life as those months when I was having an affair with Marilyn.”

IV

“Tennis is a perfect combination of violent action taking place in an atmosphere of total tranquility.”

While Marilyn came across as chill, laidback, she was actually controlling and possessive. Isolated Billie Jean from her tennis friends. After the tour, Billie Jean slowly tried to separate from her. They hadn’t spent much time together after the initial affair, but Marilyn, manipulative, wouldn’t let go. In 1978, Billie Jean finally ended the relationship; according to one biographer, she was afraid Marilyn might kill her.

Marilyn threatened to go public with love letters. When Billie Jean tried to pay her off with half the value of the Malibu house Billie Jean had paid for and Marilyn had been living in, Marilyn said she wanted more—the whole house and a lifetime of benefits. This was 1981. Billie Jean was thinking of retiring. She was approaching forty and her knees were giving out. She had already had several knee surgeries. Marilyn filed a palimony suit.

Or, as the press called it, “galimony.”

May 3, 1981. Billie Jean held a press conference with Larry, confessed to her affair. Her parents, Betty & Bill Moffitt, were there to support her. The judge ruled against Marilyn, saying it was clearly a vendetta, that she was just seeking revenge. Billie portrayed the affair as a one-time

mistake; Larry sat beside her, kept his arm around Billie Jean the entire time the cameras were there.

The press speculated that Larry must be gay, too.



Another facet of her private life had become public. Billie Jean King was thrown into an advocate role again, but it was an identity she wasn't ready to claim.

V

"I have often been asked whether I am a woman or an athlete."

In a 1971 US Open match vs. Rosie Casals, we see her wiping the sweaty bangs off her forehead, the male sports announcer says, "Billie Jean. Used to be a shortstop on a girls' softball team. A fullback on a boys' football team when she was *very* young. Her mother got her out of that game." Casals, backpedaling at full speed, leaping, slams a return. "Big overhead from the little girl!"

Though consistently pegged as a tomboy, King saw the feminine appeal of athletes as a way to promote women's sports. Ads for curling irons featuring Billie Jean King ran during the Battle of the Sexes.

Because nothing says “feminine” more than artificially curled hair.

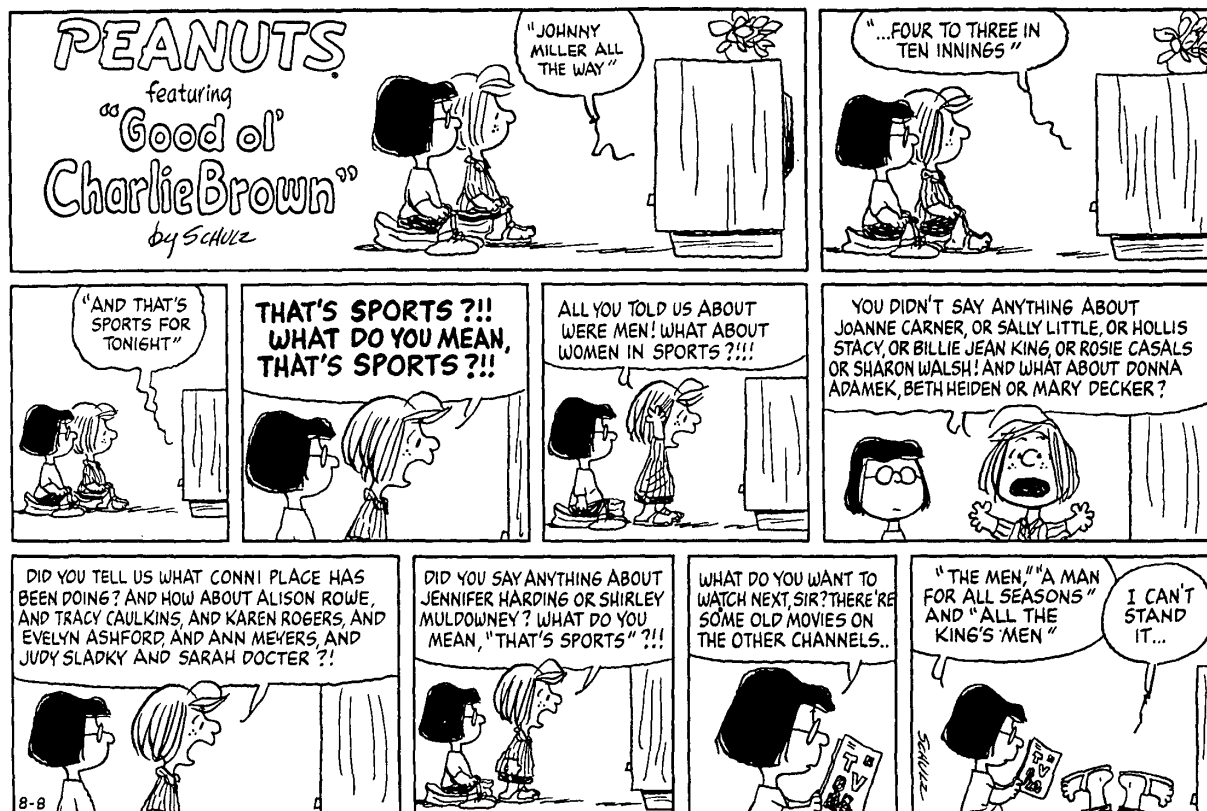


We wrap our fingers around a bicep to measure strength. Men develop muscle in their upper body but women often develop quads more easily than arm muscles.

When I was in high school, girls could qualify for the Presidential Physical Fitness Award by simply not doing a pull up. Because the bar was so low, figuratively, we were encouraged instead to do the bent arm hang—where we didn’t have to pull ourselves up but simply hold on, chin above the bar, as long as we could.

The only fitness test that rivaled the bent arm hang in passivity was the sit and reach, where you sat and leaned forward, stretched your arms forward. This was the only test where the girls were

expected to outperform the boys. This was the only test I ever failed—I couldn't even reach my toes.



VI

"I certainly did not let this information slip out at the time, but a major reason I had to seclude myself for so long in advance of the match with Bobby Riggs was to help me get comfortable with the idea of beating a man.

Even now, that's very hard for me to deal with; some things are deeply ingrained."

When Billie Jean King met Ilana Kloss, a tennis player thirteen years younger, she asked Larry for a divorce. Once again, he talked her out of it. Ilana became Billie's "business assistant." But this time they booked separate hotel rooms on tour.

Billie Jean didn't divorce Larry until 1987. Maintaining that the Marilyn Barnett incident was a one-time mistake, she didn't come out fully to her parents until she was fifty-one. In a 2007

interview, she said, “When I speak to Mom now, she will always say, ‘And tell Ilana I love her’. That’s taken years and years.”



CHAPTER 3: Chris & Martina

The rivalry between Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova has been called one of the best sports rivalries of all time. From 1973 to 1988, these two players battled each other for the #1 ranking in women’s tennis.

Before You Read

“She’s the perfect image of a lady who happens to be an athlete. Whereas I was an athlete who happens to be a woman. The contrast was pretty great.”

Know that:

Any great rivalry worth its weight in primetime ratings must be a struggle between true opposites. In the beginning, this was easy. Martina was a dark-haired Eastern European contrast to blond, blue-eyed, all-American Chris. But when Martina became an American citizen and dyed her hair blond, those lines became a bit fuzzy, much like the felt cover of a tennis ball. The two women had distinct styles of play, but that doesn’t drive ratings unless those differences *mean* something. Fortunately, there is always gender.

Define key terms:

Girl-next-door
Bisexual defector
Lumberjack
Mixed doubles

Ask yourself:

What is this story about?

THE RIVALS

Chris Evert, born in 1954, was taught to play by her tennis pro father. At age fifteen, she was beating top-ranked women. She joined the United States Tennis Association (USTA) tour the next year.

In her first three years on the tour, Chris won twenty-three tournaments. In the locker room, she kept mostly to herself; the other players on the tour thought she was unfriendly. **Billie Jean King** called a meeting and chided the women for not being more welcoming to Chris. They said she’s standoffish. Billie Jean responded—she’s sixteen!

She was also the best poster child that women’s tennis could hope for. *The New York Times* called her “Cinderella in sneakers.” Chris quickly became a celebrity and was known simultaneously as “America’s Sweetheart” and “America’s Ice Princess.”

Her **girl-next-door** image was complicated by a complete lack of girlish emotion. She gave nothing away on the court. She was focused and even-keeled. Or, as

What Do You Think?

Would the press call a male athlete an “Ice Prince”? Would he at least be a figure skater?

the press described her, cold and calculating. Tough. Ruthless. Frigid.

Martina Navratilova, born in 1956 and raised in Czechoslovakia, was not the stoic athlete that Americans might have expected to emerge from behind the Iron Curtain. She had the physique, but she was anything but emotionally controlled. She cursed herself after bad shots, argued calls, celebrated points. She cried. Spoke her mind in interviews, too.

“One thing I’ve noticed since I’ve come to the States is that fans do not like female athletes to be outspoken and aggressive.”

In later years, after she started fitness training and not just relying on her raw talent, the press played up her physical intimidation factor even more. But if Chris was the Ice Queen, Martina was a big softie. She said she likes playing doubles because after a match “you always have someone to hug.”

Martina had Forearms of Steel, but Chris had Nerves of Steel. Who was tougher? What was more threatening?

Martina won the Czech championship in 1972, and the Czech Federation let her play the US winter circuit that year. Martina played on two Virginia Slims tours. The Virginia Slims Circuit was the first all-women’s tour started by Billie Jean King and other top players like **Rosie Casals**, who had left the USTA tour to protest unequal prize money at tournaments.

At that point, Martina had only taken a year of high school English. Traveling by herself, she ate hamburgers for every meal and gained almost twenty pounds during her first two weeks in the States. Always a skinny kid, she said that after the weight gain, she felt she looked more feminine; she finally had curves. It was not great for her game, but she was still good enough to be noticed. The press called her “The Great Wide Hope.”

At that point, Chris had not yet joined the renegades on the Virginia Slims tour. She was not one of those feminists.

Chris was not even eighteen yet.

In 1972, a *Sports Illustrated* writer described the women’s tour as “an amazingly good-looking group of people, especially when one thought of the stereotype of the woman athlete. Nobody had a beard. . . . Nobody waddled. Not a **lumberjack** in the group.”

“I came from a Catholic, very protective family, so I didn’t even understand women’s lib back in those days.”

THE RIVALRY

1973 Evert 2-0

Martina played Chris for the first time. Chris, two years older, was already a top player. In fact, she was Martina’s grandmother’s favorite player. A poster of Chris hung on the wall of the tennis club in Revnice where Martina used to practice.

So Martina was surprised that Chris even noticed her, said hi to her in the locker room. Later, Chris recalls their first meeting: “There might have been a thousand people milling around that day and there’s Martina walking around in the crowd in this one-piece bathing suit with these crazy tan lines going here and there, still twenty-five pounds overweight, eating a popsicle.”

1974 Evert 2-0

After winning her first professional tournament, Martina celebrates by throwing her arms around a light pole next to the umpire’s chair. Far from home, she didn’t know anyone in America well enough to hug.

Did You Know?

Before 1975 women couldn’t get a credit card in their name without their father or husband co-signing for the account.

On the women’s tour in the seventies, there was a sense that they were all in it together. The camaraderie of pioneers? In any case, they had a lot of fun.

Rosie Casals was often the ringleader of the summer camp-like shenanigans. Calling themselves the “Ladies of the Evening,” they waited until the spectators went home then put on matches for their own amusement. One such match between Peachy Kellmeyer and Vicky “Bird Legs” Berner involved Peachy drinking a beer (and Vicky a glass of scotch) on each changeover.

Billie Jean King was the umpire, wearing thick glasses (even thicker than her real ones) and making outrageous calls. The other women dressed in ridiculous outfits and watched. Sometimes they had other events, like talent shows, and Martina remembers performing a choreographed ballet number.

Martina was given a nickname and a t-shirt to go along with it: “Navrat the Brat.” She felt like “part of the gang.”

Chris dated tennis star Jimmy Connors. They even made it to the finals of the US Open together in mixed doubles. The wedding was set for November 1974, but it was called off weeks before.



1975 Evert 9-2

Chris took the #1 ranking from Billie Jean.

Title IX was signed into law.

After losing to Chris in the semifinals of the US Open, Martina applied for political asylum, forfeiting her Czech citizenship and her right to go home. She didn’t know when she would be

able to see her parents, sister, or grandmother again. The American press suggested she must either have a boyfriend or want more money.

Martina became a “nonperson” in Czechoslovakia. The state-run media were not allowed to even mention her name. The newspapers were forced to run creatively worded stories: “The four semifinalists of Wimbledon are known. They are Chris Evert, Andrea Jaeger, and Evonne Goolagong.”

In America, a media frenzy followed her announcement. Martina became a celebrity, started getting standing ovations at matches. She had chosen freedom, eh?

Chris asked Martina to be her doubles partner, and they won the French Open a few weeks later and then Wimbledon the next year. Playing doubles, they began a friendship that ended up outlasting their rivalry.

Did You Know?

The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), passed in 1996, prohibits Americans from sponsoring their same-sex spouses for green cards. The Czech Republic is one of nineteen countries where immigration policy allows sponsorship of same-sex partners.

1976 Evert 2-1

It took Martina about a year to realize the enormity of her decision to defect. On the one-year anniversary, she was back at the US Open in New York. After her first-round match, she sat down on the bench, towel over her head, and sobbed.

She was only eighteen.

1977 Evert 5-1

“I just try to concentrate on concentrating.”

Chris and Martina had developed distinct styles of play. Chris, a right-handed player, had practically trademarked the two-handed backhand and the nerveless baseline game. She would hang back, wear her opponents down with consistent returns. Martina, a lefty, rushed the net with a more aggressive style of play. She had a one-handed backhand and a powerful serve. As Ted Tinling² remarked, “She goes from arrogance to panic with nothing in between.”

“Ninety percent of my game is mental. It's my concentration that has gotten me this far.”

1978 Evert 3-2

² Tinling was a tennis player turned Wimbledon emcee turned sportswear designer who designed dresses for all the famous women players in the ‘50’s, ‘60’s, and ‘70’s. His Wikipedia page, which says he was also a spy and author, doesn’t say why he went by “Ted,” only that his real name was Cuthbert Collingwood, which seems a good enough reason. Like Sir Elton John, Tinling was a close friend of Billie Jean King (and openly gay).

After Martina defected from Czechoslovakia, she was “stateless” for over five years while she waited to become eligible to apply for American citizenship.

1979 Navratilova 5-2

A mutual friend introduced Chris to British tennis star John Lloyd. “Lovely to meet you,” he said. This made her think he must be gay, but her friend assured her no, he’s just British. They were married nine months later. Later Chris admits it was a whirlwind romance; says she was looking to fill the idealized wife role as she became increasingly disillusioned with tennis. Both Billie Jean and Martina were invited to the wedding.

1980 Tied 2-2

Chris and Martina met in the semifinals of Wimbledon in 1980. Scoreboard read: “Miss M. NAVRATILOVA” and “Mrs. J. M. LLOYD.” Watching highlights from the match on YouTube thirty years later, I am shocked at how young Martina looks. The image I had in my mind was of an athlete later in life— muscle bound, bleach-blond hair bordering on mullet, wearing glasses and possibly an awkward headband.

1981 Navratilova 3-2

“People judge you by appearances, and since I was all woman underneath, I finally figured I might as well start dressing the part. I think it helped me be in the best shape of my career.”

In her autobiography, Martina writes that in the summer of 1981 she started paying more attention to her hair. (Speaking of hair, Martina got her first perm in 1975—from Marilyn Barnett!³) For her new look, she bleached her hair blond. She also got a new wardrobe.

For the past few years, Martina had been dating Rita Mae Brown⁴. They bought a house in Virginia together, but they were going through a rather messy breakup. Martina never felt the need to hide her identity or her relationships with women, but it wasn’t always up to her.

“I probably overcompensated . . . I still thought of women athletes as freaks, and I used to hate myself, thinking I must not be a whole woman. The nail polish, the ruffles on my bloomers, the hair ribbons, and not wearing socks—all of that was very important to me. I would not be the stereotyped jock.”

That was also around the same time that Billie Jean was forced to come out when her former lover (yes, Marilyn Barnett) sued her for palimony. So the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) advised Martina not to come out. No joke, they

³ You may or may not remember Marilyn Barnett as the hippie hairdresser who had an affair with Billie Jean King and then sued her for palimony when Billie Jean tried to break off the relationship.

⁴ *Rubyfruit Jungle* is one of *the* lesbian novels.

“I was getting to like the new me—makeup, blond hair, and frilly clothes.”

were afraid of losing sponsorship from Avon. In America, it was not a repressive government, but a makeup company.

So Martina told the reporter from the *New York Daily News* to keep comments she had made about her sexuality off the record, but of course the story ran anyway. By that time, Martina was in a relationship with Nancy Lieberman, a professional basketball player who was in the closet. “Just friends,” they said about their live-in relationship.

Despite her conservative image, Chris was among the first to voice her support for Billie Jean and Martina after they were outed.

Six years after she applied for asylum, Martina finally got a hearing to become an American citizen. She was worried that she might be too “controversial.”⁵ She was asked what color is the flag, who was first president, and can the president alone declare war? (That last one was the only one she got wrong—she said yes.) Then they asked about her sexuality, and she said “**bisexual**.”⁶

Making Connections

Which recent United States president also got confused about that question of declaring war?

1982 Navratilova 3-1

Martina was featured on the cover of a *Time* magazine for an issue about the “new femininity.” Recalling this moment, Martina says, “There I was, forearms and all, right next to Olivia Newton John.”

1983 Navratilova 6-0



1984 Navratilova 6-0

In January, Chris and John separated. After their wedding, John had fallen from #26 on the men’s tour to #356. He started “tanking” in matches, which was worse than choking since it implied an element of giving up. The British press liked to refer to him as “Mr. Chris Evert.”

Martina’s new coach, Mike Estep, convinced her to change up her strategy in her matches with Chris. Told her not to try to beat Chris at her own game. Charge the net. Take advantage of Chris’s weak serve. In her autobiography, Martina quotes him saying, “The baseline player is the counterpuncher, and women are taught to be

⁵ Gay

⁶ “I’m not a one-sex person, and yet I hate the term *bisexual*. It sounds creepy to me, and I don’t think I’m creepy.”

counterpunchers, to react to things.” She adds, unnecessarily, “I think he meant in life as well as in tennis.”

Chris had never lost to Martina on clay, so despite Martina’s recent domination, the match, billed as “The Clash on Clay,” in April 1984 was seen as Chris’s chance for a comeback. However, Martina won decisively 6-2, 6-0.

At Wimbledon 1984, the paparazzi had a field day. Between Chris’s recent separation from John and Martina’s new girlfriend, Judy Nelson, a recently-divorced former beauty queen with two young boys, there was enough gossip on all sides.

Martina won Wimbledon, making it a tie, each with 30 career wins against each other.

Chris took a break from the tour. Martina went on an eleven-month, 74-match winning streak.

After losing to her in the 1984 French Open, Hana Mandlikova said in a press conference, “It’s hard playing against a man—I mean, Martina. She comes to the net and scares you with those big muscles.”

“Look at me in a crowd and I don’t tower over everybody. Sure, my forearms are bigger than the other woman players’, but I didn’t get them in a five-and-dime store—or drugstore, either. I got them partially from my genes and partially in the gym.”

Martina at 5’ 7” was only an inch taller than Chris. At the peak of her career, Martina weighed 145. Chris, 125. But the way people talked, it was as though Martina was bionic. As though the fact that she was not afraid to build muscle gives her an unfair and unnatural advantage in women’s tennis.

Tom Powers of the *St. Paul’s Pioneer Press* called Martina “a walking mixed doubles team.”

When Chris returns to tour, she starts lifting weights for the first time.

1985 Navratilova 4-2

Martina published her autobiography when she was twenty-eight. I am twenty-nine when I read it, and I get the sense that I’m missing something. Martina assumes the reader has preconceived notions of her as a person and that she is just filling in the background, re-telling the stories from her point of view. I imagine it must be difficult to talk about yourself when everyone thinks they already know you. I imagine it must be interesting to have more than ten years in the public eye by the time you’re thirty.

At the French Open, Chris beat Martina (6-3, 6-7, 7-5) and recaptured the #1 ranking for the first time in over three years.

Did You Know?

Martina’s glasses correct her 20/20 vision to 20/10.

“When I was younger, I was a robot. Wind her up and she plays tennis.”

1986 Navratilova 2-1

In July 1986, Martina returned to Czechoslovakia for the first time since her defection. She played in the Federation Cup and went undefeated.

At the Australian Open that year, Martina defeated Chris and found her crying in the locker room after the game. In all those years, Martina had never seen her cry; she started crying herself.

Martina and Judy invited Chris to Aspen for holidays and introduced her to Andy Mill, a former US Olympic downhill skier. The two of them stayed at Martina's house for an extra week, and they were married nineteen months later.

"For sixteen years we were left alone on Sundays in that locker room. All in all, I think we handled it pretty damn well."

1987 Navratilova 3-2**1988** Navratilova 3-2

The epic rivalry ended when Chris retired, leaving the count at Navratilova 43 – Evert 37.



IN HER OWN WORDS: Martina Navratilova

In the prologue of her autobiography, *Martina*, she writes:

I was used to people mistaking me for a boy.

I was the last girl in my class to get her period, and as for a figure, forget it.

“Scout,” an old lady once called me.

“Scout, could you help me cross the street?”

Growing up, Martina played ball with the boys. Tennis and ice hockey and soccer. A caption in her autobiography reads: “On a pond in Revnice, 1966. I thought I was real cool in my figure skates. My mother wouldn’t let me play in hockey skates.”

Martina grew up with her mother as a role model as an active athletic woman; she was a tennis player and taught Martina the game. Martina says, “We had no idea of tomboys—there’s no word for it in the Czech language. Women played sports and had families and had jobs. That simple.”

She writes about images of women in Czechoslovakia: beautiful actresses from classic films, but also the “patriotic factory worker with her short hair and muscles.”

Martina did well in school. She liked playing with toy cars. She had crushes on her tennis coach, George Parma, and on her female math teacher.

Ambidexterous and athletic, Martina still couldn’t do a somersault in gym class.

* * *

When she was little, Martina’s father told her she’d play at Wimbledon and that she’d be pretty one day. She believed the part about Wimbledon.

CHAPTER REVIEW: Chris & Martina

✓ Game, Set, Match!

A. Match the keywords to the correct player. Write a context sentence for each one. Then diagram your sentences.

Chris Evert

Martina Navratilova

B. Fill in the blanks using terms from the word bank.
(You may use words more than once.)

“I came to live in a country I love; some people label me a _____. I have loved _____ and _____ in my life; I've been labeled “the _____” in print. Want to know another secret? I'm even _____. I don't like _____. Just call me _____.”

Word Bank

Girl-next-door	Labels
Bisexual	Men
Defector	Women
Emotional	Chrissie
Stoic	Martina
Left-handed	Gay
Right-handed	Manly
Blond	Muscular
Blonder	Feminine
Blondest	Strong
Cold	Ambidextrous
Hot-and-cold	Lesbian

☛ Guess Who?

A. Who said the following:

1. “I still thought of women athletes as freaks, and I used to hate myself, thinking I must not be a whole woman.”

- Martina Navratilova
- Chris Evert

2. “I went through all the stages that other people do, but at the wrong time.”

- Martina Navratilova
- Chris Evert

B. Refer to this dialogue to answer the following questions:

Male Reporter: What did you do last night to prepare for the game?

Female Tennis Player: Not telling [wink].

- Who is the “Female Tennis Player”?
- Imagine that Martina said that.

✂ Apply Your Knowledge

A. In 2001, Martina was a contestant on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*?

1. Which charity did she compete for?
 - a) Save Marriage
 - b) Save the Gays from Marriage
 - c) Save the Rhino
 - e) Save the Gay Rhinos

2. When host Regis Philbin introduced Martina’s “companion,” he was referring to:
 - a) her dog
 - b) her girlfriend

B. Compare & Contrast: Male sportswriter Jim Murray has written profiles on both Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova. Consider the images he uses to characterize these two athletes and answer the following questions.

“Chris never managed to look like she just got off a tugboat or just put out a cigar. She wore ponytails and earrings and hair ribbons⁷. She played in bracelets until they got in the way. Louisa May Alcott would have loved her.⁸”

1. What is Jim implying about women’s tennis players who aren’t Chris Evert?

Martina is described as “an athlete who weeps in victory, smiles in defeat, wears designer clothes and actually looks good in earrings.”

Hint: “When she began to beat the golden Chris Evert . . . Martina was treated like a truck driver at a royal lawn party.”

2. Is Jim surprised that Martina looks good in earrings? Why or why not?

3. Match the figurative language to the athlete described. Remember Chris is hosting the garden party; Martina is the truck driver crashing it.
 - a. “She had the patience of a *schoolmarm*.”

 - b. “[She] plays with the intensity of a *deer fleeing a forest fire*, but she turns as coldly efficient as a *serial killer* when the Queen’s cup is on the line.”

 - c. “She walked with the graceful little mincing steps of a *belle at a cotillion*. You half expected her to have a *parasol*.”

 - d. Watching her play is “like watching someone *pull the wings off a butterfly*”

 - e. She has the “tenacity of purpose of a *bulldog on a rope*”

⁷ Note for future reference: hair ribbons—good, hair beads not so much.

⁸ Really? I’m guessing Alcott would have liked Martina. Though maybe she wasn’t her type.

- f. “[Her] enduring contribution to the game was not tenacity, it was *femininity*.”
- g. “She spanned the era from Billie Jean King to Steffi Graf with *grace and taste*. She kept [her opponent] from swallowing the game whole.”
- h. “She is, typically, *hardening* her body and *toughening* her mind for the U.S. Open.”
- i. “She is as tough and focused as *Mike Tyson with his man on the ropes* or *Nolan Ryan with a guy looking for the curve*.”
- j. “*Unruffled*, confident exterior”
- k. “She manages to dispatch those younger, fiery schoolgirls with the steady competence of *someone plucking chickens*.”

Extra Credit: Is it possible for an athlete who is also a woman to play aggressively without evoking images of serial killers and animal cruelty?

C. When asked by a male reporter what the hardest part about being a female athlete was, Rosie Casals answered, “You ever try to play tennis with two apples on your chest?”

Do you agree that this is the most difficult part about being a female athlete? Explain your answer in a five-paragraph essay. If you disagree, make sure that you provide an alternative thesis. Use examples from the text.

D. **Where Are They Now?** Use the pictures below to help you evaluate the following claims.



1. They have gone from rivals to lovers⁹ and are now a lesbian couple.
2. They have become twins who wear different color scarf/sweater combos to distinguish themselves.
3. After years of competing as opposites, they have merged into a single blond person.

⁹ Like they always say, rivals is just a misspelling of lovers backwards.

Answer Key

Game, Set, Match!

A. Answers will vary

B. "I came to live in a country I love; some people label me a **defector**. I have loved men and women in my life; I've been labeled "the **bisexual defector**" in print. Want to know another secret? I'm even **ambidextrous**. I don't like **labels**. Just call me **Martina**."

Guess Who?

A. 1. b, 2. a

B. 1. Chris Evert, 2. Answers should include the words "creepy" and "lesbian."

Apply Your Knowledge

A. 1. c, 2. b

B. 1. They are lesbians or cigar-smoking tugboat captains, possibly both. 2. Yes. 3. Chris Evert: schoolmarm, belle, femininity, grace and taste, unruffled; Martina Navratilova: deer fleeing forest fire/serial killer, pulling wings off butterfly, bulldog, hard/tough, Mike Tyson, plucking chickens.

C. Answers will vary

Venus and Serena

- I. Introduction
- II. Tennis whites
 - A. Clothes
 - B. Tradition
 - C. Martina Hingis
 - D. America
 - 1. Red does not hide the sweat.
 - 2. Venus and NBA player Dwight Howard
 - 3. Venus in blue
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- III. Childhood
 - A. Book reports
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- IV. Careers
 - A. The Bump Heard 'Round the World
 - B. Venus Wins Wimbledon
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 - 1. One
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- V. Doubles
 - A. Partners
 - B. Doublemint
 - C. Double standards
- VI. Conclusion

venus williams

venus williams wardrobe malfunction

venus williams hot

venus williams boyfriend

venus williams almost had a wardrobe malfunction in italy

venus williams dress

venus williams malfunction

venus williams tennis

serena williams

serena williams hot

serena williams body

serena williams wardrobe malfunction

serena williams tennis

The Williams sisters are the tennis stars of my generation, the athletes of my generation, really. Venus is two years older than I am, Serena only six months—so I was too old to still be reading *Sports Illustrated for Kids* when they made the cover in August 1998. And when my twin sister and I stopped reading *SI for Kids*, we didn't start reading *Sports Illustrated*. So I didn't see Venus's first (and only) cover appearance on that magazine either.



September 15, 1997. Venus, 18. Braids—frozen in midair and beaded: white, blue, and red. She has just hit a backhand shot, ball and racket are out of focus. Her mouth is open in concentration. She still has braces.

The caption reads: “Party Crasher: Venus Williams Shakes Up Tennis.”

It’s not that she wasn’t welcome, of course, just that she wasn’t invited.

I’ve never followed tennis, so I know little about Venus and Serena though they’ve been on the national stage for more than half the time I (and they) have been alive.

It is one thing to read a biography of Babe Didrikson and note that accounts of her track victories at the 1932 Olympics referred to her as an Amazon. It is another to hear Chris Evert, women’s tennis legend, comment that the Williams sisters’ “athletic ability and raw aggression make it hard for the women who aren’t Amazons to compete with them.”

This is the post-Title IX sexism I grew up with. This is the racism I was taught not to see. In the preface to “The Invisible Knapsack,” her now-classic (and still-relevant) list of specific advantages that make up white privilege, Peggy McIntosh says:

I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group.

I am used to seeing pioneers in the past tense. I find myself piecing together a sense of Venus and Serena’s careers from videos and news articles on the internet. This makes everything seem more dramatic as I skip from drama to drama, “incidents” and flashpoints. I find more and more information and less of a context for it.

When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

I remember watching figure skating with my mom. Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding—we rooted for both of them before the scandal. Both were underdogs, both grew up working class, and it was a toss up—Nancy Kerrigan was a local, from a Massachusetts town an hour away; Tonya Harding had asthma, like my sister, and was the first woman to land a triple axel. I had no interest in skating beyond playing pond hockey in my white figure skates (which I hated because

in figure skating, white does the work that pink does everywhere else). But I found these athletes to be the most inspiring. Maybe because I never saw women soccer players in the news until the US team won the 1999 World Cup and Brandi Chastain stripped down to a sports bra.

I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

Before Nancy and Tonya, we rooted for Debi. Debi Thomas, the first African-American to medal at the US figure skating championships. She won bronze at the 1988 Olympics.

As a white person, I can choose when I want to write about race. I can identify others' race while my own remains invisible. Other people bring race into my story. If I wish, I can ignore my race when writing about other aspects of my identity.

White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.

I was never seriously interested in tennis, though I grew up in what could be called a tennis town. And by that I mean a very white, very rich New England town. But there tennis was played in clubs, and in a town of 5,000, there were three different tennis clubs even though there were public courts at both of the schools. I always associated the sport with a different type of person than me; I didn't see myself playing tennis any more than playing croquet or polo. Our small public high school could barely field a football team most years, but we always won states in tennis. Sometimes the top spots on the team would be eighth graders before they headed off to prep school.

The tennis I learned was playground tennis—we played tennis the same way we played ping-pong, pool, and street hockey—using sheer strength and enthusiasm to compensate for our lack of finesse, technique. By the time I got to junior high, I was a decent soccer player just from playing town league; I am still a crappy tennis player.

Richard Williams didn't wait until someone saw talent in his daughters; he decided they would be tennis stars before they were born. He picked tennis when he turned on the television one day

and saw tennis player Virginia Ruzici take home \$40,000 in prize money from a single tournament. Williams prepared for it himself, reading manuals, watching videos, teaching his wife to play as well. He started teaching Venus and Serena when they were four, hitting for hours on the public courts in their Compton neighborhood.

I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.

Richard Williams called his daughters “Cinderellas from the ghetto.” When he showed up on the tennis scene, people found him to be excessively cocky, predicting that his daughters would be the best in the world. They found him to be brash. He was accused of being self-serving, using his daughters to promote himself to the spotlight, selfishly re-focusing the attention on himself with his trash talking.

I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.

But Venus and Serena couldn't just walk in without breaking down some doors, and they were only teenagers.

I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.

Was Richard Williams the lightning rod? He was the one to call out racism when he saw it, so his daughters didn't have to, so they could focus on tennis like all the other players on the tour who had the privilege of being unaware of their own race.

Striking a match is one way to call attention to a gas leak that no one will acknowledge. Was he just taking the heat?

II. Tennis Whites

A. Clothes

In the early days of the sport, tennis was played, like other genteel sports were, in clothes that required players to be gentlemen and gentlewomen first, athletes second. Clothes such as collared, long-sleeved shirts and flannel trousers for the men; long sleeves, long skirts (cover those ankles), and corsets for the women.

Tennis fashion has evolved over the years—first with the discovery of the fact that women, when freed from constricting whalebones, actually had the ability to breathe, and then with the invention of Lycra. Yet “tennis whites” have endured. Players at Wimbledon are still required to wear all-white outfits when competing.

White makes a lot of sense, reflecting the sun as you bake midday on a shade-free court. And white hides the sweat. But a tradition that marks status and class can't be borne of practicality. White clothes became the uniform of choice for this upper-class sport because they required more upkeep—more time and money put into clothes for a leisure-time activity—than darker colored ones.

B. Tradition

Of course, the tradition of tennis whites is not simply a matter of wearing the right color.

Billie Jean King learned this in her first juniors tournament when she was kept out of the official tournament photo because she was wearing white shorts her mom had sewn; they couldn't afford to buy the tennis dresses the other girls were wearing. Her homemade shorts showed that she had learned to play tennis on public courts, in a working-class suburb.

Not that I have a problem with tradition. But the problem is that tradition always favors the traditionally favored.

Imagine how the sign would look: Tennis Whites Only.



C. Martina Hingis

“Being black only helps [the Williams sisters]. Many times they get sponsors because they are black. And they have had a lot of advantages because they can always say, ‘It’s racism.’ They can always come back and say, ‘Because we are this color, things happen.’”

Martina Hingis told *Time* magazine in a 2001 interview.

I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.

Hingis (pictured above, on the left) is nicknamed “The Swiss Miss,” but I don’t think she was ever offered sponsorship by the hot cocoa company. Probably because she is white. Or maybe because she is blond.

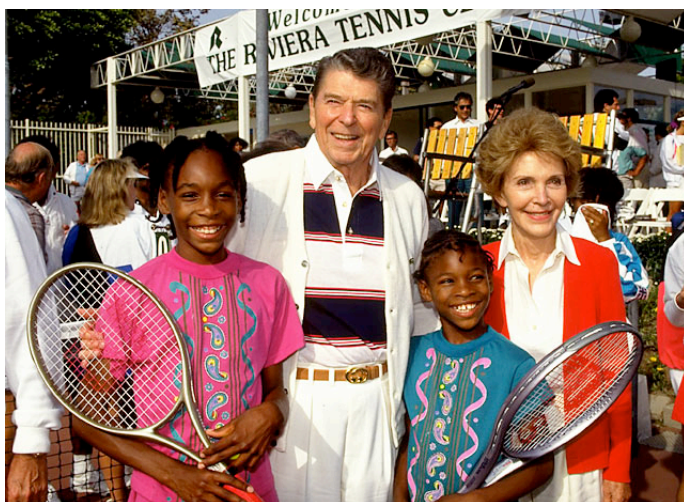
When Richard Williams alleged racism on the tour, Hingis, at the time the number one seed, stated in a press conference, “I definitely don’t feel like there is any racism on the Tour. I mean, it’s a very international sport . . . they may be black but they have a lot of other—how do you say?—advantages to be where they are. They can always say it’s racism or something like that and it’s not the case at all. Not from my standpoint.”

My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.

Hingis is not the only Martina who has views on racism in tennis. Martina Navratilova said, “People have been afraid to criticize [the Williams sisters] because they don’t want to be called racist.”

Did Navratilova think that a fear of being called homophobic silenced her detractors?

D. America



Tennis is really the all-American sport. Baseball might be more apple pie, and basketball and football might be more popular, but a team sport can’t capture the spirit of America. Tennis is an individual sport. Notice how doubles has never quite caught on.

But the real reason tennis is uniquely American is the illusion of equal access coupled with an institutional power that perpetuates systems of inequality. With tennis, it’s not high equipment costs that provide the biggest barrier to participation. Even with access to a public court, young tennis players need to have high quality coaching early on if they are to be competitive in a way that other sports don’t require until later in high school or college.

Coaches and trainers are certified by the USTA. The organization runs juniors tournaments. More than any other popular sport in the US, tennis is a self-contained system. It's like if the NBA had direct organizational control over YMCA leagues, high school basketball and NCAA teams.

I will feel welcomed and "normal" in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.

It has a democratic flavor. Exceptional players like Venus and Serena remain exceptions.

I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.



Women athletes are most likely to be photographed in passive poses. More likely to be photographed off the court. More likely to be pictured with children or husbands. More likely to be photographed with their siblings covered only in strategically placed American flags.



1.
Red does not hide the sweat.



2.
Venus and NBA player Dwight Howard



3.
Venus in blue

E. Beat this girl

Video: Serena is playing Maria Sharapova at the 2008 Family Circle Cup. The short clip shows Sharapova's coach giving her a pep talk.

Sharapova this whole time is not looking at him, just staring ahead as though she's slightly annoyed. Breaking off a few pieces of a banana and eating them. She looks like the popular girl, the head cheerleader, blond and poised and perfectly blasé.

He says, "And you just be tough and that's it and you gotta believe that you're going to beat this . . .

[pause]

girl."

Sharapova's chewing the banana and stops, lets out a little laugh of disbelief. And her coach laughs, too.

"I almost slipped up there," he says.

Of course, we don't know what he was going to say, do we? She did.

I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.

Video: Maria Sharapova smashing the ball into Serena at the 2007 Australian Open.

Serena's at the net; Sharapova aims a forehand smash right at her. The announcer laughs nervously, "Well, that's one way to stop Serena."

III. Childhood



Crewneck sweatshirts and oversized t-shirts with multicolored logos. Reeboks. Growing up in the eighties and early nineties.

I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.

The courts Venus and Serena grew up playing on were only twelve miles from the public courts in Long Beach where Billie Jean King learned to play.

A. Book reports

I wrote a paper on Billie Jean King in elementary school. I also remember writing book reports on biographies of Walt Disney, Lewis Carroll, Jack Kerouac, George Washington Carver, Dr. Seuss, and Charles Schulz. Looking back, my interest in men was clear. It's surprising that I turned out to be a lesbian.

When I read about Billie Jean King, what I saw was an athlete who looked like a tomboy. Who looked like a lesbian, really, but I didn't know they existed then and the biography for young readers didn't happen to mention that Billie Jean was one. What I also didn't notice then was that she was white, just like me. Growing up sheltered and closeted, I didn't recognize this privilege. It could be argued that white lesbians were overrepresented among the small selection of women we learned about in school—Eleanor Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, Babe Didrikson, Florence Nightingale.

I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

Serena recalls writing a report on Althea Gibson. She says, “I once wrote a paper about her for school. I know that it was so hard for her. There were tournaments that wouldn’t let her play because they weren’t accepting blacks. That went on for years. And when she could get into tournaments, she wasn’t always allowed to use the locker room like the other players, or eat in the dining room like the others. She had to sleep in cars at tournaments when everyone else was sleeping in hotels. She’d wake up, play her match, and then go back to the car.”

I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.

1. Althea Gibson

Althea Gibson’s autobiography was called *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*. She won Wimbledon in 1957 and defended her title in 1958. She won the Babe Zaharias Outstanding Woman Athlete Award both years as well.

I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

Friends remember her as someone who was good at any sport she tried—tennis, paddle tennis, basketball, softball, pool. Because there was no women’s pro tennis tour, in 1963 Gibson made history as the first black woman on the LPGA tour. She played until 1977, entering 171 tournaments.

With the major professional sports leagues—the NBA, MLB, NFL—the time from when the “color line” was broken until black players were represented proportionally to overall population was between ten and twenty years. It was forty years between Althea Gibson winning Wimbledon and the beginning of the Williams sister’s professional careers. In the meantime, Zina Garrison made it to the Wimbledon championship in women’s singles in 1990. Though it’s hard to

find statistics on the number of people of color playing tennis at any level, it's clear that only four top-ranked African-American women tennis players in over fifty years qualifies as severe underrepresentation.

B. Sisters

I never knew that Venus and Serena had other siblings, too. They grew up with three older sisters.

I didn't realize until now that I was avoiding the phrase "sibling rivalry."

I can't imagine being constantly compared to my sister on a national stage. Or being forced to compete with her at the highest level. When we were growing up, other people were always more interested in the competition—who was smarter? who was better at sports?—but having a twin more like having a teammate than a built-in opponent.

When Venus defeated Serena in the semifinals at Wimbledon in 2000, some speculated that Serena let her big sister win. What would that mean?

My sister and I are twins, but we don't look any more alike than Venus and Serena. I never understood how people could mix the two of us up until I realized that those who couldn't tell us apart were the ones who didn't actually care.

IV. Careers

A. The Bump Heard 'Round the World

Video: At the 1997 US Open—Irina Spîrlea and Venus Williams are switching sides between games and they collide as they walk around the net. The camera shows Spîrlea after the bump, wiping the sweat from her face, but the towel doesn't wipe off the creepy grin that has taken over her face. She's looking up at her coach and friends, hardly containing her glee. On the other side, Venus shows no emotion as she takes a sip of water.

Q. Can you tell us about the collision at the changeover chair at 4-3 in the second set?
What was that all about?

IRINA SPIRLEA: I'm not going to move. I mean, she's never trying to turn or whatever. She thinks she's the fucking Venus Williams. She not going to turn. She just went like this. I was like, "I want to see if she's turning." She didn't, so.

Richard Williams calls Spîrlea a "big white turkey."

Because he said "white," Williams is accused of being the one to bring race into the incident. Because before that it was just a white tennis player and a black tennis player bumping into each other, and the white tennis player making inflammatory comments about how arrogant she perceived the black player to be.

If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.

B. Venus Wins Wimbledon

Venus beats Lindsay Davenport to win the Wimbledon title in 2000. After the victory, Richard shouts, "Straight outta Compton!" and jumps on top of the NBC broadcasting booth to do a celebratory dance. Sportscaster and former women's tennis star Chris Evert is quoted as saying that the broadcasters "thought the roof was coming down."

C. Indian Wells

The controversy: At a tournament held in Indian Wells, California, Serena and Venus are scheduled to play each other in the semifinals. Venus pulls out of the match with tendinitis in her knee. The crowd thinks it's just a way for the sisters to avoid having to play each other. This fuels speculations that Richard Williams is fixing his daughters' matches.

If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.

Video: The mostly white crowd boos Serena throughout the entire match as she plays Belgian Kim Clijsters. Serena is nineteen years old.

I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.

Later, Richard Williams tells the press that he and Venus were subjected to shouted racial epithets as they walked to their seats for the match.

I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.

Neither sister has played at Indian Wells since. They continued their boycott even as the USTA tried to implement “mandatory attendance” rules to force them to play.

D. Serena’s Outbursts

1. One

Another match against Kim Clijsters, this time at the 2009 US Open, when the line judge calls Serena for a foot fault on her second serve.

Not only is it a questionable call, hard to see evidence on the replay, but it’s rare to make such a call, especially at that point in the match.

“I swear to God, I’m fucking taking this ball and shoving it down your fucking throat ... I swear to God.” The outburst ends with a "motherfucker" for punctuation.

After this, the line judge who made the call runs over to the chair umpire.

Then we see Serena pleading with the line judge, “I didn’t say I would kill you. Are you serious? Are you serious? I didn’t say that.”

Definitely uncalled for, yes, and technically you would probably kill someone if you shoved a tennis ball down their throat. But it’s hard to see this in a vacuum and think that there aren’t any stereotypes coming into play here.



If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones.

Serena is assessed a code violation, and her opponent is given a point, which ends the match.

2. Two

2011 US Open—Down a set to Australian Samantha Stosur, Serena yells “come on” after hitting a ball she felt was a winner. It’s against the rules to shout while the ball is still in play, and she yells before the ball gets to Stosur. We’re talking split seconds here. Normally what would happen in this situation is they would play a let—replay the point to eliminate any disadvantage the distraction might have caused. But the umpire gives the point—and the game—to Stosur.

I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.

This means that the chair umpire, Eva Asderaki, made the call that Serena's yell was intentional—that it was a deliberate attempt to interfere with Stosur's return. Asderaki, perched atop the umpire's chair with an emotionless face and her long hair pulled neatly back into a tight blond ponytail. Even the commentators are surprised the point is given to Stosur; it is an uncommon call.

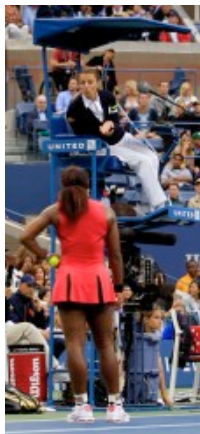
Unlike the men who lose it at umpires—John McEnroe, Andy Roddick, Jimmy Connors, et al.—sounding like petulant children, screaming and waving their arms and rackets, Serena is composed. She's not yelling, and she doesn't use any profanity. She's controlled—just venting.

I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.

“You're totally out of control. You're a hater and you're just unattractive . . .
[taps her chest]
inside.”

You know what is kind of amazing here—in the heat of the moment she hears herself calling another woman ugly and she amends it. Or maybe she was just pausing for dramatic effect.

I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the “person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my race.



“Who would do such a thing?” she asks Asderaki.

“And I never complain.”

The *New York Times* reports: “For the second time in three years, Williams’s menacing behavior toward an official at Arthur Ashe Stadium overshadowed her opponent’s brilliance.”

Two days later at the same tournament, Roger Federer complained to the chair umpire that his opponent should not be allowed to challenge a line call so long after the point had ended: “I wasn't allowed to challenge after two seconds. The guy takes like ten every time.” When the umpire told Federer to be quiet, he went off: “You have any rules? Don't tell me to be quiet, ok? When I want to talk I'll talk, all right...I don't give a shit what he said, ok?”

Needless to say, this was not discussed on morning news shows. It doesn't *mean* as much.

V. Doubles

A. Partners



B. Doublemint



C. Double standards

Double the pleasure, double the standards.

“Play like a man, look like a woman.” I clicked on this video thinking it would be a critique of the media’s portrayal of women athletes and the double standard society imposes on us. It was a sports bra advertisement.

“Sporty, Sexy, Strong & Stylish . . . Every KALYX sports bra is designed for women who play hard and still enjoy looking pretty. Girlfriends – take a walk on the wild side, know that KALYX Technologies is here to protect your precious assets!”

I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.

Serena is simultaneously derided for being too curvy—for being “out of shape”—and for being too muscular, too powerful.

Venus owns her own interior design firm, and both she and Serena have their own clothing lines. Shouldn’t we be happy that they’re not just relying on their tennis careers? Anyone would want their child to pursue education, follow other dreams they can fall back on when their knees give out. But instead Serena and Venus are criticized for not being serious, not focusing on tennis, for selecting which tournaments to play.

I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.

When Richard Williams took his daughters off the junior circuit, he was criticized by the tennis establishment. Venus and Serena were both number one in the California 14-and-under and 10-and-under categories, respectively, when their father moved the family to Florida and enrolled them in a private tennis academy. This was not how it was done. The criticism was veiled with the tone of, Don't they know they have to play by the rules?

Without playing another juniors tournament, Venus turned pro when she was fourteen.

It seems that we judge most harshly those who violate unwritten rules when not too long ago their presence would have violated the rules written to keep them out.

Conclusion



I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

Caster

“Did you know ‘Caster Semenya’ is an anagram of ‘Yes, a secret man’?” The anonymous online poster who pointed this out to me is not the only one to recognize the anagram—Google shows 24,400+ hits for the search.

Caster Semenya: World champion at eighteen. Captured the women’s 800-meter title at the World Games in Berlin in 2009.

Following the race, the speculation about her gender really took off. She has a deep voice and muscles. But more important, it seems, she is really fast. *Faster than a woman?* She shaved eight seconds off her personal best in less than a year. Maybe it was because she came from a poor village in South Africa and, once she had access to university training, she made a huge improvement. Or maybe it was because she is really a man. Yes, a secret man.

On the other hand, Leonard Chuene, the former president of Athletics South Africa who lied about his role in gender testing Semenya, is cleared by the anagram test: A LECHER NUDE? NO. Maybe he is just an uncleaned hero. Or a clean nude hero. Or a rude clone hen.¹⁰ Though things aren’t looking good for his future as a leader. CAD. HE RULE NONE. Better hope Caster’s not planning to seek revenge. CAN ELUDE HER? NO. RUN, LEO! EACH END.

Chuene was suspended from ASA in 2009 when it was discovered that he had known about gender verification tests performed on Semenya without her knowledge. (She was told they were drug tests.)

CEREAL DONE, HUN?

Some online commenters question why Caster’s parents gave her a traditionally male name. Others suggest the first five letters of her last name suggest her real gender. What they don’t know is that the name “Caster” is a variation of “Castor,” which means “beaver.”

¹⁰ I should be careful playing this game, though. I—a lick icy eel. I, who would be accused of liking cay lice.

From the Greek Καστωρ (Kastor), possibly related to κεκασμαι (kekasmai) meaning “to shine, to excel.”

Castor and Pollux, mythological twins, two stars in the Gemini constellation. Castor is a binary star—two stars rotating around a common center of mass.

Male and female, masculine and feminine, cannot be parsed as some kind of continuum. Rather, sex and gender are best conceptualized as points in a multidimensional space.

-Anne Fausto-Sterling

But we still use the old school either/or model. With such an emphasis on X and Y, it’s not surprising it is such a polarizing issue. I like to think of gender as more of a Venn diagram than opposing axes, but we haven’t quite figured out what to do with the overlap in the middle—the intersection.

According to Fausto-Sterling, the total number of people whose bodies differ from standard male or female is one in 100 births. This means that intersexuality is more common than Down syndrome. Or albinism. People with intersex outnumber redheads.

The rate of intersex births is even higher in South Africa, though it’s unclear why.

The total number of people receiving surgery to “normalize” genital appearance: one or two in 1,000 births, though this is hard to track since every birth in the US must be recorded as male or female.

When determining gender for the purpose of athletics, there is an emphasis on gender differences that affect physical performance. Eric Vilain, professor of human genetics and pediatrics at UCLA, says: “The best biological marker, if you want a level playing field, would probably be functional testosterone.”

Sports give us so many metaphors for life.

If athletes with higher levels of testosterone develop more muscle mass, it seems logical that any hormonal imbalances should be corrected to level the playing field.

But should we disqualify basketball players with acromegaly, a condition that causes the body to produce more than the normal amount of growth hormone? Should athletes like former NBA player Gheorghe Mureşan or college star Kenny George (both 7' 7") be banned from competition due to naturally occurring hormonal advantage?

The line between tall and short is less important to delineate clearly in our society. I can exist, at 5'7", as a short tall woman or a tall short woman. Being average, between the two extremes, usually makes it easier to slide by, but the opposite is true of gender.

In the 2006 Asian Games, Santhi Soundarajan of India was stripped of a silver medal in, coincidentally, the 800 meters, after a sex verification test showed she had male chromosomes (XY). This is how she found out that she had androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS), which means that though she is genetically male, her body does not respond to male hormones.

The *London Times* reported the following about the Beijing games in 2008:

"To ensure that girls will be girls, officials have set up a sex-determination laboratory where they say that tests will be conducted with the utmost delicacy by four experts from the Peking Union Medical College Hospital. The hospital has spent more than a year designing the facility to ensure the minimum of embarrassment for those athletes who may be asked to prove their credentials."

This was in 2008.

Prove their credentials.

"Explaining this policy, Professor Tian Qinjie said: 'Suspect athletes will be evaluated from their external appearance by experts. They will then undergo four tests, including blood tests, to examine their sex hormones, genes and chromosomes for sex determination.'"

Suspect athletes.

As a junior runner, Caster Semenya got used to going into the bathroom with one of her opponents to verify her private parts before the race.

This was the same test that had been done at the highest levels of competition not that long ago. Before chromosome and hormone testing, athletes were judged to be women by a visual genital inspection. They were forced to parade, pants off, in front of a panel of (usually male) doctors.

*“Ewa Klobukowska, the Polish runner who took gold in the women's 4x100 metres relay and bronze in the 100 metres at the 1964 Summer Games in Tokyo, was the first athlete to be **unmasked as a man** when she **failed** an early form of chromosome test in 1967. She was found to have a rare genetic condition **that gave her no advantage over other athletes, but was nevertheless barred from competing in the Olympics and other professional sports.**”*

Bold is mine. Obviously.

Interesting that you can fail a sex determination test. Is it a failure on your part when your determined sex doesn't line up with your gender?

And, incidentally, a year after she “failed” her sex determination test, Klobukowska gave birth to a son.

In 1966, Roberta Gibb became the first woman to run the Boston Marathon. Because she was not allowed to register (being a woman), she disguised herself in a blue hooded sweatshirt, hood up, and her brother's knee-length shorts at the starting line.

Suggesting that there might be more at stake here than who is the fastest runner in this race, the number of people across the world who are interested in Caster Semenya's private business now greatly outnumber the number of people who at any other point in time cared about who won the women's 800-meter.

Our discomfort with sexual ambiguity can be seen even in our animated feature films. An inability to properly distinguish the sexes makes us nervous, even if we are dealing with non-humans. This is why Minnie Mouse has to wear a bow. A dress and heels. Eyelashes. Such obvious accessories detract from the whole realistic-talking-animal thing that is in right now. This is why animators of the recent film about a plucky young dancing Emperor penguin, *Happy*

Feet, had to get creative. There is no sexual dimorphism found in Emperor penguins, no way to visually distinguish male and female penguins in this species. When a lost Emperor penguin was found in New Zealand this summer, the scientists had to perform a DNA test to determine its sex. How long did it take you to determine the sex of our animated penguin friends below?



Who's your daddy?

Pressing about details of treatments and testing, a female BBC interviewer asked Caster, “Would it be better if you were able to say, ‘This is what happened’?”

“Better for me or you?” Semenya returned.

The “gender row,” as the British press called Caster’s gender testing, showed that for the most part Western journalists were more concerned with the “sex scandal” than South Africans, who rallied around Caster, including her rural neighbors who watched her grow up. According to friends and relatives, Caster had always preferred pants over skirts and enjoyed playing sports with the boys.

When Caster and her coach, Michael Seme, stopped at a gas station in Cape Town to use the restroom, she was stopped by the station attendants from entering the women’s restroom. Seme said, “Caster just laughed and asked if they would like her to take off her pants to show them she was a woman.”

In an AP photo (below left) used on the Huffington Post under the headline “Caster Semenya Gender Testing Murkier Than It Sounds,” she has a shy smile. Cropped hair cropped out, exclusive focus on eyes and smile.



The *Sun*, a UK tabloid, uses the photo on the right.

Headline on Time.com asks, “Could This Women’s World Champ Be a Man?”

In a BBC feature, her first television interview after the gender testing, Caster is wearing a pink track jacket. The interview is cut with shots of her lifting weights. In the weight room she’s wearing a t-shirt, black, fitted, cut in a way that looks cute and athletic but not butch.

For another press conference, she’s wearing a pink Nike hoodie and a ponytail.

Gender verification was required for all (female) Olympic athletes until 1999.

This meant you were male until proven otherwise. This is consistent with the way we perceive gender. Unless there is something to suggest femininity, we see male.



In 1985, Spanish hurdler Maria Patiño went to compete in the World University Games and forgot to bring a letter from her doctor verifying that she was a woman. Officials performed a chromatin test. She had XY chromosomes. Like Santhi Soundarajan, she was diagnosed with androgen insensitivity. This was news to her.

News got out. Maria's athletic scholarship was taken away. She was kicked out of the national athletic residence. Her fiancé left her. But the sanctity of women's sports was protected from another secret man.

Interesting that she was the one diagnosed with insensitivity.

The IAAF's policy on gender states that an athlete "can be asked to attend a medical evaluation before a panel comprising gynecologist, endocrinologist, psychologist, internal medicine specialist, expert on gender/transgender issues."

An athlete will be examined if there is any suspicion or challenge. Judging from opponents' comments, the most suspicious athletes are generally the ones winning.

"These kind of people should not run with us," said Elisa Cusma, an Italian runner who finished sixth in the 800 meters at the world championships in Berlin. "For me, she is not a woman. She is a man."

After losing to Martina Navratilova in the 1984 French Open, Hana Mandlikova said in a press conference, "It's hard playing against a man—I mean, Martina. She comes to the net and scares you with those big muscles. She is very big and difficult to pass."

Martina is 5'7". Caster Semenya is 5'7". I am 5'7".

Men can't suggest that their competitors are too manly, or unfairly tall and strong, but they can raise other issues. They can complain about having to run against someone who has no legs.

Angelo Taylor, an American hurdler, told the *New York Times* what he thought was unfair about Oscar Pistorius, a, coincidentally, South African runner—a Paralympic athlete beating able-bodied runners on the international level. “It’s definitely an inspiration for a lot of people, but at the same time he doesn’t have to deal with certain things like we do. You have a calf injury. You have plantar fasciitis or any foot injury . . . [and] he doesn’t have to worry about that.”

Obviously.

Yet studies have shown that Paralympic athletes actually suffer more injuries during training compared to non-amputee sprinters. Athletes with prostheses also have to cope with additional running injuries generated from the friction between their limbs and the prostheses.

Some people have called swimmer Michael Phelps, fourteen-time Olympic gold medalist, “transhuman.”

Is that a euphemism for interspecies?

Not only are sex and gender distinct, but it’s really the interaction between gender expression/gender identity/sexual orientation/sex that explains why so many people don’t fit neatly in the boxes of “man” and “woman.”

Basketball coaches pacing the sidelines in awkward dresses and aggressive pearls. High school soccer players tying their hair back with ribbons. Billie Jean King’s mullet.

For reasons unrelated to trans-inclusion, schools should evaluate the necessity of gendered dress codes and recognize that they tend to marginalize a range of students who may not feel comfortable with them. Dress codes for athletic teams when traveling or during a game day at school should be gender-neutral. Instead of requiring a girls’ or women’s team to wear dresses or skirts, for example, ask that team members wear dresses or slacks that are clean, neat, well cared for and appropriately “dressy” for representing their school and team.

You don’t have to identify as masculine to feel like you are in drag when you’re wearing a skirt.

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CLEAR OUT THE CLUTTER: TIPS THAT REALLY WORK



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“I am who I am and I am proud of myself,” Caster told the magazine. She is also quoted saying, “I’d like to dress up more often and wear dresses but I never get the chance.”

I know I’m not pretty but I do try to be graceful.

Overtime or extra innings. Penalty kicks. There’s no room for ties. In place of ambiguity we choose sudden death.

“I’m not going to run slower so I don’t pick up critics. But I don’t breed controversy just because I’m in a position to.”

If it is simply a matter of leveling the playing field in physical competitions, why is this tactic not only used in sports, but in every field? Women politicians are policed for their clothing choices and then we wonder why they wear unflattering pantsuits, as if they have any other choice.

Gender is a false dichotomy.

Sometimes people suggest to me, with not a little horror, that I am arguing for a pastel world in which androgyny reigns and men and women are boringly the same. In my vision, however, strong colors coexist with pastels. There are and will continue to be highly masculine people out there; it's just that some of them are women. And some of the most feminine people I know happen to be men.

-Anne Fausto-Sterling

Binaries break down. “If a man without legs can challenge the best athletes in the world, what does it mean to be disabled? And what will it mean in the coming decades, when technological advances annihilate handicaps and create amputee athletes who can run faster than their able-bodied competition? Is it fair? How will the advantages of one athlete’s carbon-fiber shinbones be weighed against another’s surgically corrected vision?”

Interesting you can go from being disabled to being unfairly advantaged fairly quickly. Sometimes I think we make things too complicated when maybe it just comes down to whether someone would cut their legs off in order to gain an athletic advantage.

The only instance where a man actually disguised himself as a woman to gain an athletic advantage was in Hitler's Germany. A man named Hermann Ratjen (or "Dora") competed in the 1936 Olympics in the women's high jump. He placed fourth, losing to three women.

When asked if he'd mind if Pistorius beat him in a race, a British opponent said no. "The athletes who complain are the ones who aren't running fast enough."

Whether or not the carbon prostheses actually give an advantage to amputee athletes is unclear. Some biomechanics experts claim that a runner using these specialized prostheses uses 25% less energy than a runner on two legs.

In 2007, the IAAF amended its rules to bar "[u]se of any technical device that incorporates springs, wheels or any other element that provides the user with an advantage over another athlete not using such a device."

All the top Paralympic runners use Cheetahs, yet none but Oscar has been able to compete with non-disabled runners. Rodger Kram, professor of integrative physiology at the University of Colorado, says, "Oscar is running so fast because of what he has *above* the knees." As Christopher Keyes, author of "Oscar Pistorius Has a Huge Carbon Footprint," writes, "We can believe in [Pistorius's] genetic greatness the same way we can appreciate Michael Phelps's hereditary gifts."

Speaking of that already-legendary swimmer,

What kind of animal is Michael Phelps?

Flying fish? While most people's wingspan is equal to their height, Phelps (6'4") has a wingspan of nearly 6'7".

He has monkey arms, but **doesn't need to eat bananas**. His muscles produce 50% less lactic acid than other athletes.

Natural flippers? The average shoe size for a man Phelps's size is 12; he wears a size 14. Bigger feet give him an advantage over his competition, and his double-jointed ankles create virtual flippers. His larger-than-average hands act as paddles, move more water with each stroke.

Aquadynamic! Phelps's physique is shaped to reduce drag through the water. Proportionately short legs and long torso allow for maximum propulsion.

Marine mammal? Phelps's larger-than-average lung capacity means he can stay underwater longer than opponents.

Definitely not a whale. Only 4% body fat.

Natural butterfly? Double-jointed Phelps is able to extend his (superhuman long) arms higher above his head and pull down at a more efficient angle. This increases his efficiency through the water by as much as 20% and helps him maximize his starts and turns.



The IAAF forced Caster to take eleven months off from competition. In July 2011, Caster was cleared to compete in women's events. (Originally I wrote "cleared to compete as a woman," which was how *The New York Times* worded it—is that something the IAAF can determine?) Her first major race after her forced hiatus was the 2011 World Championships.

She comes in second this time, but she's smiling more. She has a beautiful smile. She looks genuinely happy. Her tank top is longer this time, covering her six-pack abs.

This time Russia's Mariya Savinova comes from behind, beating her by a couple strides in the last four seconds.

After coming in fifth at the 2009 World Championships, Savinova had responded to reporters asking if she thought Caster was a man by saying, "Just look at her."



Though claiming it was not in response to the Caster incident, the IAAF revised their policies on gender verification in 2010. Women who test high for functional testosterone will have to regulate their hormones to the "normal" range for women in order to compete.

Of course, there is natural variation in men as well, and men with higher levels of testosterone have a competitive advantage over other men.

Biologically speaking, female is often seen as the default. Unless the sex-determining gene on the Y chromosome turns you into a man, you become a woman. In this way femaleness is seen in

the absence of male hormones. Though there is not actually such a thing as “male” and “female” hormones; we all have the same hormones, just at different levels.

We have set up a society that requires a clear line drawn between two sexes, but the more we learn about how our bodies actually work, the harder it becomes to maintain that line. Whose genetic gifts do we celebrate, and whose hormones do we regulate?



End Notes

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