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To cite this article: Clare Tebbutt (2015) The Spectre of the 'Man-Woman Athlete': Mark Weston, Zdenek Koubek, the 1936 Olympics and the uncertainty of sex, *Women's History Review*, 24:5, 721-738, DOI: [10.1080/09612025.2015.1028211](https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1028211)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1028211>



Published online: 16 Apr 2015.



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The Spectre of the 'Man-Woman Athlete': Mark Weston, Zdenek Koubek, the 1936 Olympics and the uncertainty of sex

Clare Tebbutt

This article argues that women athletes were implicated in discussions of sex changeability occurring in 1930s Britain. The topics of the suitability of sport for women and of sex changeability were both given considerable press coverage. Sports officials were faced with the practical problem of how to differentiate female competitors from male ones. Medics at London's Charing Cross Hospital interpreted athleticism and an interest in sport as signs of maleness in patients. Sports practice developed muscles, which were held to be akin to a male secondary sex characteristic. An awareness of the unfixity ascribed to somatic sex means appreciating that debates about the masculinity of sportswomen cannot be understood simply as homophobia—the possibility of changing sex was a real concern.

'Men–Women Problem for Sports Chiefs'¹

In May 1936 and again in August 1936, there was a flurry of articles in the British popular press reporting the problem of the 'man-woman athlete'.² A piece from

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the *Daily Sketch* is typical of this coverage. Under the headline, ‘Women Who Change Sex: problem for sports organisations’, readers were informed that:

Women’s sports organisations are taking steps to deal with the problem of the man-woman athlete. . . . The subject will be raised jointly by England and Czechoslovakia, each of whom have had a case of a woman athlete being changed by surgical operation into a man.³

The concerns expressed were not abstract ones: accounts of men who had been registered female at birth were a regular feature of the 1930s popular press, as suggested by the matter-of-fact references in the article to ‘women who change sex’ and ‘the man-woman athlete’. In 1936 there were two high-profile cases of former women athletes being declared to be men—Briton Mark Weston and Czech Zdenek Koubek—the athletes referred to by the *Daily Sketch*. The coverage of Weston and Koubek’s official changes of sex coincided with the summer Olympic Games in Berlin, underlining the need for officials to determine who could compete as a woman athlete and the difficulties this task entailed. The *Daily Sketch* quoted a spokesperson for the Women’s Amateur Athletic Association acknowledging the need to prepare for possible ‘doubtful cases’. This points to three key ideas: that there was a popular familiarity with the idea that sex was not always stable or immediately intelligible, that an association was made between changing sex and women’s athletics and that sports organisations faced difficulties having to officiate over who qualified as female. The spectre of the ‘man-woman athlete’ hung over women’s athletic participation in the 1930s.

As Alison Oram has demonstrated in her studies of gender crossing in the British Sunday press, stories of sex change were a relatively frequent occurrence in the 1930s, and, in contrast to earlier accounts of gender crossing, they were ascribed a medical interpretation.⁴ Hormone research meant that sex was reported to be less differentiated than previously thought and a connection was made between these new concepts of the unfixity of sex in the body and instances of changes in sex. As Adrian Bingham has argued, the popular press had massive influence in interwar British society and culture and offers a valuable insight into the discourses around gender at this time.⁵ An examination of both the daily and Sunday newspapers can expand on the work of Oram and Bingham to trace the pervasiveness of the idea of sex changeability in 1930s British popular culture. The two most prominent cases were those of Weston and Koubek, and their status as former women athletes was referenced so frequently as to form an association between ‘sex change’ and the potential masculinity of women athletes.

Just as athletes were reported to have changed sex, sport was changing in the interwar years with the vastly increased participation of women. In turn, women were held to have been changed by sport.⁶ Sporting achievements challenged popular notions of distinctions between male and female bodies; women were shown to be capable of strength, endurance and competitiveness, which had been coded as the preserve of men. The idea of ‘musculinity’, a term proposed by Jennifer Hargreaves to describe the power available to women through

muscularity, highlights the continued association of musculature with masculinity and maleness. Muscularity, and sport more generally, were being used as a measure of masculinity by medics examining patients whose sex had come under question. The insistence that muscles and sport were inherently male meant that theoretically, no woman athlete was safe from the suggestion that they were not entirely female.

The Berlin Olympic Games in the summer of 1936 elicited a discussion regarding sex changeability. There were many press stories debating the femininity or masculinity, femaleness or maleness, of women athletes, but major sporting events were an instance when these debates demanded a degree of resolution. Women's sport competitions required sex segregation—only women could compete in women's events—and thus required decisions as to who did and did not qualify as female. The Berlin Olympics, coinciding with press coverage of Weston and Koubek's changes of sex, generated concern that it was difficult to decide quite who was a woman. Vanessa Heggie is one of the first researchers to trouble a received chronology that has dated sex testing to the 1960s.⁷ Heggie demonstrates that questions of sex testing had traction at the 1936 Games and that this was to no small extent due to the popular familiarity with, and impact of, Weston and Koubek's cases.⁸ Heggie's argument is elaborated upon by exploring why there was such concern in the summer of 1936 that officials might not be able to determine an athlete's sex.

Athletes Change Sex

The British popular press bore witness to the currency of the idea of sex changeability. There were twenty or so cases of a 'change of sex' reported in the British popular press during the 1930s and these people's stories were covered by multiple newspapers over multiple days and picked up and retold by other news media such as magazines and cinema newsreels.⁹ The popular press was an integral part of the fabric of 1930s Britain, a commonplace in the lives of most people. Newspapers were factored as a necessity, not a luxury, in a 1936 budget calculation for everyday living.¹⁰ Whether people bought newspapers themselves or had access to those purchased by others, the press had a considerable reach into the lives of Britons and played an important role in the nation's cultural life. The wide impact of the popular press meant that the sex-change stories were not just peripheral, they were part of the landscape of the 1930s.

Anne Fausto-Sterling's configuration of sex as unstable and open to social and cultural interpretation is central to this reading of sex changeability in 1930s women's athletics. She argues that sex, rather than being taken as an objective and empirical truth, ought to be understood as socially and politically constructed, just as gender has been.¹¹ Fausto-Sterling's argument is especially pertinent to 1930s anxieties around sex changeability because it is a way of appreciating that it was not just gender expectations that were changing, but also the understandings of the sexed body and of what differentiated male from female.¹²

At the same time as women's athletics was, the press informed readers, contending with sexual ambiguity, endocrinological research was challenging the fixity of sex. Research showed that there were not hormones that were the exclusive property of men or women; somatic sex was controlled by a balancing act of different hormones and was not absolute.¹³ Speculation about the sexed body proved to be a rich source of material for journalists. Many articles appeared pondering the potential for 'sex hormones' to alter sexual characteristics. *Time* magazine, in its coverage of Weston and Koubek's changes of sex, offered readers an explanation for the changes the two men had undergone, drawing on the burgeoning field of endocrinology: 'Normal men generate traces of female hormones, and vice versa. Thus, being male or female is not a matter of one element completely excluding the other, but rather of one element dominating the other'.¹⁴ Allusions to glands and hormones were employed to portray the human body as a balance between male and female and, consequently, sex as changeable.

Reporters referred to 'sex change' and the 'man-woman', and while both these terms had broader meanings, the majority of cases might now be understood under the rubric of intersex, a description that was not used by the press, but which was used by contemporary medics. 'Sex change' tended to refer to a person's status having been changed from female to male or from male to female; it did not refer to any one particular identity, medical condition or treatment. 'Man-woman' is an obsolete term that is hard to pin down. It is an excellent example of how distinctions between sex, gender and sexuality, and understandings of sexual ambiguity, were mutable and incommensurable with present-day classifications. 'Man-woman' was a designation premised on ideas of ambiguity and non-fixity and of a middle ground. In the context of 'man-woman athletes', this ambiguity was prescient because the fast-growing field of women's competitive athletics demanded strict sex segregation and thus criteria by which to distinguish women from men, and no room for anyone who fell outside those categories.

The British 'sex-change' case to garner the most press coverage was that of Mark (previously Mary) Weston. Weston, a British women's champion at the shot put and javelin, received cursory press coverage throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. Weston was, however, destined to receive far more press coverage off the field than on it. In late May 1936 the popular press picked up the story that, in the words of the *Daily Express*, 'Woman Turns into Man: Miss Mary is now Mr. Mark'.¹⁵ For a week the British tabloids teemed with interest in Mark Weston. Readers were informed of the two operations he had undergone at London's Charing Cross Hospital, his long-standing sense of 'a certain strangeness in being a woman' and the possibility of marriage to the woman who was 'marvelously helpful to me in my transition'.¹⁶ In August 1936 Weston was once again the focus of press stories, this time with the news of his marriage to Alberta Bray, the friend who had been so helpful throughout his change.

The coverage of Mark Weston promoted the idea in the popular imagination that changing sex was a modern possibility and could be achieved with specialist medical intervention, delineated as 'sex operations' or 'special operations'. The

case for the ordinariness of sex changes was reinforced in many articles by reference to other examples of changes of sex from the early to mid 1930s.¹⁷ Weston's story was also a cue for papers to report other contemporary cases of a change of sex, such as those of Zdenek Koubek and Jolan Kun, running these articles alongside those concerning Weston.¹⁸ The press coverage of a (minor) public figure like Mark Weston offered readers an identifiable image of sex change and a context in which to comprehend the phenomenon.

While the debates around women athletes, sex and masculinity were not tackled in the initial articles about Weston's change of sex, each was accompanied by a photograph of Weston in sportswear throwing a javelin or shot. It makes sense that at short notice it would be these older photos of Weston on file, but the overall effect was to inscribe the body of the woman athlete as a man. The combination of photographs of Weston in action on the athletics field with the headlines "'She' Now a Man', 'Woman Who Has Become a Man', or 'Woman Turns into Man' visually communicated a link between Weston as a woman athlete and becoming a man.¹⁹

That Weston had made an impact in the popular press is apparent in the subsequent references to him. During the Berlin Olympic Games, the International Amateur Athletics Federation issued a call for medical examinations to 'tackle that 'man-woman' problem'.²⁰ Although Weston had ceased competing in 1932, some four years earlier, he was still mentioned in newspaper accounts of this announcement.²¹ Weston remained a point of reference, such as in a short *Daily Mirror* article about the change of sex of Polish athlete Sofia Smetkovna in 1937, which mentioned Weston as context for this new case.²² Whether Weston lingered in the public imagination, or whether his experience was simply a neat example of the sex-change narrative, he continued to be a crucial representative case of sex change.

Zdenek Koubek was a Czech athlete whose change of sex was also reported in the British press in 1936.²³ Some newspapers linked Weston's and Koubek's stories from the start, as in this feature about Weston:

It will be recalled that a few months ago a well-known Czecho-Slovakian 'woman' athlete underwent a series of operations to change her sex.

Eventually 'she' assumed the name of Mr. Kdenek Konbek [*sic*]. As a woman, this athlete competed in the women's World Games at the White City in 1934, when she set the world's record for the 800 metres race.²⁴

The article then went on to list other instances of sex change, but these received less prominence than Koubek's, with his pedigree of also having been a woman athlete. The *Daily Herald* mentioned Koubek on the day it first covered Weston's story.²⁵ Koubek's change of sex was reported in this article with no explicit reference or connection made to Weston's, but the juxtaposition of these two 'girl-athletes' pointed to a question mark over the sex and gender identity of women athletes more generally.

Koubek, reflecting the international nature of interwar sport, had received coverage in the British press as an athlete. Known then as Zdenka Koubková, Koubek

had won the 800 metres race at the 1934 Women's World Games in London. Being an athlete became key to the way Koubek's change of sex was discussed in the press. Koubek's event, the women's 800 metres, was banned from the Olympics after the 1928 games in Amsterdam on the grounds that it was too strenuous and unseemly for women.²⁶ Therefore Koubek had been performing in a discipline that had been deemed unfit for women by the most powerful organisation in sport. Similarly, the President of the American Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage, reserved particular distaste for women shot putters, meaning that the athletic disciplines of both Weston and Koubek—shot putting and the 800 metres—were already seen as incompatible with feminine appearance or stamina, emphasising the two athletes' position as being outside the bounds of femininity.²⁷

In the summer of 1936 Koubek travelled to New York to perform in a revue on Broadway, where he was met by a great deal of US press interest.²⁸ Koubek starred in a sketch that played on his past involvement with sport and with the Olympics in particular.²⁹ The stage show reiterated the connection between competitive athletics and sex changeability. It created an instantiation of the 'man-woman athlete', offering the public a visual correlation between masculinity, competitive sport and women's athletics. Later that year Koubek went on to star in cabaret in Paris.³⁰ As well as those theatre-goers who witnessed Koubek's performance, there were also those who encountered it through the media, giving the notion of the questionable woman athlete greater exposure.³¹ The movement of athletes across international borders, the public appetite for sports reporting and the relative celebrity of sports stars meant that discussions of Koubek and Weston went far beyond the boundaries of their own countries.³²

The coverage of Polish athlete Sofia Smetkovna's change of sex in April 1937 was narrativised by the press by connecting it to the cases of Koubek and Weston.³³ More than eight months after the coverage of Weston and Koubek's sex changes, journalists referred back to those cases, returning them to the popular consciousness and reiterating the association between women athletes and changes of sex. The *Daily Mail*, *News Chronicle* and *News of the World* each used their headlines to make a point of Smetkovna having been a woman athlete. The *Daily Mail* and the *News Chronicle* both declared, 'Woman Athlete to Change Sex', while the *News of the World* went further in stressing the incidence of sex change amongst former women athletes with its headline, 'Change of Sex. Another Young Woman Athlete to Become a Man'.³⁴ The idea of 'another' linked changes of sex in athletes as part of a growing trend. This sense that Smetkovna, Weston and Koubek's cases shared recognisable features, that this was 'another' in a sequence of cases, was also employed in the *News Chronicle* article, which stated: 'Another distinguished woman athlete, Sofia Smetkovna (23), woman javelin-throwing champion of Poland, is to undergo an operation to change her sex.'³⁵ The *Daily Mail* did not mention Smetkovna's antecedents, Weston and Koubek, but still implied a connection between the desire to change sex and being an athlete. Smetkovna was quoted as saying:

I have made up my mind to undergo an operation to change sex.

I long ago became a great enthusiast for football, and later on went in for other strenuous sports, and finally I became the champion javelin-thrower of Poland.³⁶

The decision to seek an operation to change sex was combined with the description of a progressive immersion in sports, suggesting that sex change and sport were related and that the move from an enthusiasm for football to being a top-flight athlete mirrored the realisation that medical intervention was required. Each of these articles about Smetkovna drew an association between being a successful woman athlete and changing sex. Strikingly, Smetkovna was given a fair amount of agency; there was no reference to any rationale for Smetkovna wanting an operation, just a narrative of a choice supported by experience as an athlete. These articles about Smetkovna suggest that by 1937 the idea of a 'sex-change operation' and the propensity of former women athletes to undergo them were established. Although the newspaper articles about Weston, Koubek and Smetkovna did not necessarily spell out any correlation between women athletes and sex changes, the frequency with which stories appeared meant that the possibility of women becoming men carried an association with women's athletics.³⁷

Smetkovna subsequently returned to identifying as a woman. This was reported in the Australian newspaper the *Mirror* in May 1939.³⁸ Smetkovna's athletics career was not mentioned in this article in relation to Smetkovna assuming a female identity again, but it was still part of the paper's narrative. The first sentence is a string of clauses that sets out the bones of the story: 'Having lived for two years as a man, following an operation for change of sex, Mr. Witold Smetek, formerly Mlle. Sofia Smetkovna, a Polish javelin thrower, has decided that "he" would like to become a woman again.'³⁹ The sporting connection remained a relevant detail, reinscribing women's athleticism as significant to accounts of sexual unfixity, even if a change of sexual status were rejected.

Coverage of New Zealander Peter Alexander's change of sex also elevated the significance of involvement in women's sporting competitions. A Pathé newsreel from 1937 showed Alexander attired in a suit, holding a pipe, with a woman at his side; the visual effect was to emphasise his masculinity and the contrast between him and the woman who accompanied him.⁴⁰ Alexander recounted his personal history:

I was born and educated as a girl but men's sports have always appealed to me particularly. I'm very fond of golf, very keen on swimming, and tennis, of course. In 1927 I was the schoolgirl champion, but then I decided to give it up after that as I felt I had a decided advantage over my opponents.⁴¹

His involvement with sport was foregrounded in this narrative. Golf, swimming and tennis were all popular and respectable features of women's leisure time in the interwar years.⁴² However, aptitude for these sports could still be cited as indicative of the change of sex to follow. A piece in the Australian paper the *Northern Star* offered a similar juxtaposition of sporting interest and change of sex: 'Alexander was

known in New Zealand as Mavis Huggins, and was an outstanding sportswoman at the age of 15 years.⁴³ Sport, however much it may have become a quotidian part of women's lives, could be used as a cipher for masculinity or sexual uncertainty.

Sports Change Sex

If sex changeability was associated with women's sport, women's sport was also seen to bring about changes to sex and gender. Jennifer Hargreaves, Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska and Fiona Skillen have demonstrated the increased participation and visibility of women in sport during the interwar years.⁴⁴ Sport had been a largely male preserve, so sportswomen were involved in activities that had been coded as masculine and that exceeded the bounds of what had been considered to be typically feminine. Practising sports, and athletics in particular, brought about changes to women's physical capabilities and physiques—they increased in strength and became more toned. The physical changes that sport wrought, such as musculature, were widely associated with male bodily features.⁴⁵ In addition to adapting their bodies along, as some claimed, more masculine lines, sportswomen were having successes that seemed to lessen the physical differences between men and women.⁴⁶ In this way, sportswomen were changing the differences that were ascribed to men and women. Women's inclusion in organised sport marked the changing nature of (acceptable) femininity.

Women involved with sport were keen to stress that they found women's bodies, toned through sport, to be wholly compatible with a healthy femininity. Arguments for and against sport being detrimental to women were rehearsed in the popular press.⁴⁷ The issue was sufficiently compelling to merit official investigation. Britain's National Advisory Council for Physical Training and Education Medical Sub-Committee on the Desirability of Athletics for Women and Girls, which first met in March 1939, was formed on the premise that the suitability of women for sport was an issue that needed investigation. Their goal was to establish: '(a) whether certain forms of exercise should be discouraged and (b) whether there is a limit in any forms of exercise beyond which it is dangerous for women and girls to go'.⁴⁸ The fact that an enquiry was deemed necessary in the late 1930s suggested that women's sport and the sporting female body were still contested matters. Those involved in the field were having to prove that sportswomen could conform to ideals of womanhood in both their sex and gender.

The athletic body was exceptional and being extraordinary, having a body that lay outside the common bounds for a woman's body, meant that women athletes were already changing the expectations governing their sex. As a result, a connection between women athletes and sexually changeable bodies could be forged. Women's athletics was one of the most visible and debated of women's sports. Track and field provided sportswomen with the chance to perfect some of the purest forms of exercise; the competition was a straightforward test of who could be superlative—who could run fastest, throw furthest, jump highest.

In *Sporting Females: critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports*, Jennifer Hargreaves has proposed the term 'musculinity' to highlight the strength

of the association between masculinity and sportswomen who develop their muscles. She has called for feminists to consider the power of musculature for women, as a source of bodily strength and as an antidote to a male monopoly on physical power.⁴⁹ This idea of 'musculinity' can be developed to point to the ways that muscularity has been treated as the preserve of men, and could be seen as tantamount to a male secondary sex characteristic. This uneasy differentiation between appropriate and inappropriate muscularity for women was not just a topic for debate, it had material effects on people's lives, as it was incorporated into decisions on the psychiatric or surgical treatment that patients might receive.

In 1938, two years after Mark Weston's change of sex had attracted widespread press attention, a further description of his case was published, this time in a medical text. *The Adrenal Cortex and Intersexuality* was edited by his surgeon, Lennox Broster, and included over fifty case studies of 'departure from normal development'—mostly people with intersex conditions.⁵⁰ The book contained analysis of the patients from a variety of standpoints, including clinical and surgical case studies by Broster and psychological case studies by the psychologist Clifford Allen. Broster and Allen each drew on participation in sport to gauge whether their patients were masculine or feminine, male or female. Old-fashioned social understandings of sport as antithetical to femininity made their way into their medical analysis. An interest in sport was employed as an official gauge of masculinity or femininity—but predominantly masculinity; it was imbued with psychological significance, and the effects of sport on the body were given further credence as signs of masculinity.

Broster drew on the effects of sport as something for the medical professional to identify and interpret. He referred to musculature as a mark of masculinity in his patients:

Her general appearance is somewhat masculine and muscular.⁵¹

This patient was brought up as a female but always wanted to become a 'gentleman.' He has a strong muscular frame.⁵²

The patient looks manly with a well-formed muscular body.⁵³

Sport for women, which developed muscles, was portrayed as masculinising by implication. In his description of Mark Weston, Broster emphasised Weston's sporting success as an illustration of innate gender identity:

he was regarded as a 'tom-boy' because he instinctively preferred the company of boys to that of girls. At a later date he competed in the Olympic Games, throwing the discus as a girl.⁵⁴

He wanted to wear men's clothes at the age of eighteen, and play men's games, such as football, etc.⁵⁵

Broster treated Weston's involvement with sport as confirmation of his masculinity, a symptom that the medical professional could interpret as the manifestation of a male instinct in one who had been encumbered with a female upbringing, yet who was 'a triumph of instinctual development.'⁵⁶ In Broster's configuration,

sports, even if practised by women, were masculine activities and therefore Weston's participation in them was a telling expression of his maleness.

In the context of psychological analysis, Allen used a questionnaire to investigate what patients' behaviour revealed about their gender. The framing of the questionnaire suggested that patients' interests could readily be interpreted to show whether the patient was behaving appropriately for their sex. Under the section 'personality', sport was a key concern: 'Type of person—whether feminine or masculine in behaviour. Hobbies, sports, pleasures. (Dancing—with which sex. Reading identified with hero or heroine, etc.)'⁵⁷ While some of these pastimes needed to be elaborated upon to discern their gendered nature—dancing alone need not be gendered, it was a question of with whom one desired to dance—sport was not treated as gender-neutral. In spite of the wide take-up of women's sport in the 1930s when these case studies were being gathered, Allen viewed participation in sport as a marker of masculinity. This was made explicit in a description of one patient who was categorised as a man who had been brought up as a girl: 'He showed no interest in masculine things such as sport.'⁵⁸ Sport was treated as having gendered meanings that could provide significant insights for diagnosing his patients.

For Allen, interest in sport was a key determinant, conferring inappropriate behaviour in women and appropriate in men. For Broster and Allen, sport did not just carry cultural or social associations with masculinity. Playing sports, even watching sports, were observable as physical traces on the body. Manifestations of sport were treated as sexual characteristics that could help distinguish between masculine and feminine physiques and psyches. Broster and Allen's reading of athleticism as masculine meant that any woman athlete was potentially a 'man-woman athlete', someone who had transgressed the boundaries between male and female.

Challenging Sex at the 1936 Berlin Olympics

The 1936 summer Olympics were an arena in which concerns over the sex changeability of women athletes were put to the test. International sporting competitions were predicated on 'fair play', a central tenet of which was that men's and women's bodies were fundamentally different, and so should be strictly segregated for competition. The debates prompted by Weston and Koubek's changes of sex and the aspersions cast against women athletes more broadly meant that there was official uneasiness as to whether sex needed to be tested, and if so, how an athlete's sex could be determined.

Vanessa Heggie's 2010 article, 'Testing Sex and Gender in Sport; Reinventing, Reimagining and Reconstructing Histories', is one of the few works to recognise the significance of Koubek and Weston to the history of sex testing in sport.⁵⁹ Heggie has debunked the mythology that has developed around the 1936 Olympics and questions of 'gender fraud'.⁶⁰ These were highly contested games, ideologically as well as athletically, and part of their legacy has been stories of Dora/Heinrich Ratjen, the German high jumper who was supposedly a man

masquerading as a woman, and Stella Walsh, the Polish sprinter who would later prove to have had “ambiguous” sexual features.⁶¹ An autopsy following Stella Walsh's death in 1980 found her to be intersex. Walsh, who had been a champion sprinter, first for Poland and then for the USA, had been subject to questions surrounding her sex in the 1930s, but, Heggie contests, these arose from the climate of suspicion surrounding women athletes, not from knowledge of Walsh's sexual anatomy. Anxiety about policing sex at the Olympics has not just been retrospectively ascribed to the 1936 Olympics in the light of information about Ratjen and Walsh; there were concerns at the time, arising from a different source: Koubek and Weston's changes of sex.

A number of writers on the history and sociology of sport have pointed to the role of homophobia in governing responses to women in sport. Helen Lenskyj has written about the preponderance of masculine-looking women athletes from the 1940s to the 1960s, attributing some of these instances to intersexuality. She states that sports administrators became concerned with biological definitions of femininity but she then extrapolates to argue that sexual ambiguity was threatening in part because it raised the threat of homosexuality.⁶² Pat Griffin and Susan K. Cahn also conflate female masculinity with homosexuality.⁶³ This tendency to read sex as sexuality has subsequently been applied to debates about sex changeability in the 1930s.⁶⁴ There were fears about the sexuality of masculine-seeming women athletes, but the possibility of biological sexual ambiguity can become obscured when sexuality is the focus—sexual unfixity was an issue in itself. Just as Heggie has shown that the alarm over ‘man-woman athletes’ in 1936 was on account of Weston and Koubek rather than Walsh and Ratjen, so the confusion surrounding the femaleness of women athletes was as much to do with sex changeability as (homo)sexuality.

In 1938 Paul Gallico, surveying his time as a US sports journalist, recalled with laughter the difficulties surrounding defining sex in women's sport. He outlined the uncertainties as to the sex of some of the women athletes at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. His anecdote centred on the sprinters Helen Stephens and Stella Walsh, two of the names associated with ambiguous sex in the subsequent mythology that has built up around the 1936 Games, but he also referred to Weston and Koubek:

the mores and morals of the times have made possible deliciously frank and biological discussions in the columns of the newspapers as to whether this or that famous woman athlete should be addressed as ‘Miss,’ ‘Mrs.,’ ‘Mr.,’ or ‘It.’ Miss Helen Stephens, a big rangy schoolgirl from Mississippi, out-galloped all the best women sprinters of the world at the late Olympic Games in Berlin, including Poland's favourite, Stella Walsh. The Poles, with that sterling if peculiar sportsmanship for which Europe is famous, immediately accused Miss Stephens of being Mr. Stephens. There had been two cases, one in Czechoslovakia and one in England, where a masculine lady had, with the aid of a surgeon, succeeded in transforming herself into a not too feminine gentleman. The Poles thought they had spotted number three.⁶⁵

Helen Stephens was judged to be a woman, but Weston and Koubek's changes of sex meant that the possibility that Stephens might not be unequivocally female

was a tangible one.⁶⁶ Gallico portrayed reports of sex changeability as a facet of contemporary life. He described an atmosphere in which women could be masculine and men feminine, and a medical operation could bridge the gap between the two. The wide dissemination of sex changeability fed into concerns as to who did or did not qualify as a woman, and this posed a conundrum for those controlling women's competitions since official sporting events demanded a strict division between the categories of man and woman.

Just as the juxtaposition of photographs of Weston as an athlete created new meaning alongside copy about the change of sex, the timing of the news stories concerning Weston, Koubek and the call for sex testing at the Olympic Games led to them being grouped together, and/or appearing on adjacent pages of the same newspaper. This created a momentum for each story and a sense of a wider phenomenon than a single instance could generate. That Koubek and Weston had been women athletes was extrapolated upon by journalists to cast doubts over women athletes more generally.

The call for medical examinations for women athletes was widely reported in August 1936. Some articles made a direct link between athletes who had changed sex and the need for tests:

An American proposal that all the women competitors at the Olympic Games should be medically examined in view of the Koubek case, was put forward at today's meeting of the Olympic Games Committee.⁶⁷

The precedent of a woman athlete having become a man meant that a woman athlete could not be accepted as such simply by presenting herself as a woman; expert testimony was needed to determine what qualified as a woman's body. As well as the International Olympic Committee, the International Amateur Athletics Federation and the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale were also reported to be calling for medical testing for women athletes, citing the problem of 'man-woman athletes'.⁶⁸ The need for testing was portrayed as a pressing one:

Some of the women in Berlin last week looked more like men and the fact that there have already been two cases of women athletes being changed by a series of operations, into men, is held to make such a discussion very necessary.⁶⁹

Koubek and Weston's widely reported changes of sex had foregrounded the potential instability or illegibility of bodies—they could not be assumed to remain permanently in demarcated categories such as 'woman'. That both men had competed in women's athletics helped make the figure of the woman athlete even more suspect, and in need of surveillance.

The *Sunday Dispatch* played on Weston's medals as an element of the confusion thrown up by his change of status:

MAY RETURN THE MEDALS SHE WON IN ATHLETIC CONTESTS

Mr. Mark Weston—until a few days ago Miss Edith Marie Louise [*sic*] Weston, a champion British woman athlete—is trying to solve two of the strangest problems ever faced by a man or woman.

Should he retain the medals he won in women's British and International championship contests?
 Can he continue his former relationships with his men and women friends as though nothing has happened?⁷⁰

The question, implicit or explicit, was this: was Weston a woman when he won the women's athletic contests? And subsequently, how could one tell if a woman athlete were a woman? Might she change into a man? Might she be a man?

The press coverage of the women's events at the 1936 Olympics focused on the appearance and femininity of the athletes, in part to castigate those women athletes who did not live up to this ideal. A piece by Paul Bewsher in the *Daily Mail* entitled 'Lipstick Atlantas in Olympic Games' exemplified this, describing:

Beautiful women runners with delicate make-up on their faces and their hair exquisitely curled and waved provided a picturesque and feminine interlude in the stern and grimly masculine ardours of the Olympic Games to-day.⁷¹

This tone was similar to earlier approval or condemnation meted out to women athletes according to how well they negotiated being a woman participating in a stereotypically masculine pursuit, but it was also informed by the possibility that women athletes might now feasibly be proven to be impostors.⁷² Bewsher contrasted the femininity of the pretty Canadian and US sprinters with the most successful of their number, Helen Stephens:

Incidentally, Miss Stephens, although an American, is not one of the exquisite beauty queens, being rather masculine in appearance.

This swiftest woman in the world is more than 6 ft. tall and rather lean, and runs with an amazing quick, long stride. She finished about 10 yards ahead of the next competitor in both heats she ran to-day.⁷³

There is nothing 'incidental' in the way in which Stephens's success was linked to her 'masculine' body type. The phenomenal success of Stephens, whose sexual status was being questioned by various commentators, was attributed to her masculinity, but in the light of the Koubek and Weston cases, such correlations implicitly referred to the spectre of sex change that now hung over women athletes.

Avery Brundage, the President of the American Olympic Committee at the time of the Berlin Olympics, who went on to become President of the International Olympic Committee in 1952, was reported to be the instigator of the move to introduce sex testing in 1936. The US news magazine, *Time*, reported in August 1936 that:

Next day International Olympic Committeeman Brundage, at his first Committee meeting, roundly recommended that all women athletes entered in the Olympics be subjected to a thorough physical examination to make sure that they were really 100% female. Reason: two athletes who recently competed in European track events as women were later transformed into men by sex operations.⁷⁴

The article quoted Brundage claiming he wanted women competitors to be '100% female'.⁷⁵ In the international arena of the Olympics, individual European instances of sex change gathered significance on both sides of the Atlantic. The idea that some women were not entirely women, or that a 'sex operation' could

change a person's status from being a woman to being a man, shook the foundations of international sporting competition. Yet there is little record of these 1930s attempts to instigate sex testing. The personal papers of Avery Brundage contain no reference to his alleged desire to instigate medical examinations of women athletes in 1936.⁷⁶ Nor does the official report of the 1936 Olympics make any mention of medical examination for women athletes. The discussions that took place in 1936 regarding sex testing did not result in an official policy. It is unknown why the discussions about sex testing reported in the press have not made it into the official records, but it may be one reason why this moment of anxiety regarding sex changeability has not been more widely noted.

Conclusion

More than seventy years before the South African runner Caster Semenya had her sex called into question by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) and was subject to a barrage of intrusive speculation, international sports organisations were already facing the problem of trying to determine who is or is not a woman.⁷⁷ The treatment meted out to those whose sex was under question was hardly admirable—think of the dehumanisation in Paul Gallico's reference to “Miss,” “Mrs.,” “Mr.,” or “It”—but there was a public readiness to accept that sex was not always a straightforward case of male or female.⁷⁸ Accounts of sex changes were a commonplace in the 1930s popular media and accompanied new concepts of the fixity of sex within the body. An interest in sport was often cited as indicative of maleness in those whose sex was changed from female to male and changes of sex were frequently allied with the figure of the woman athlete. The physical effects of sports practice, especially muscles, were treated by some as akin to male secondary sex characteristics, meaning that women athletes were instigating their own changes in sex. It was not that all individual women athletes were subject to suspicion, but that the figure of the woman athlete, much discussed in the press, was aligned with sex changeability on a number of levels. To understand women's sport at this time, it is necessary to appreciate the influence exerted by the possibility of the ‘man-woman’ athlete.

Notes

- [1] ‘Men-Women Problem for Sport Chiefs’, *Daily Herald*, 30 May 1936, p. 3.
- [2] For example: ‘Men-Women Problem for Sport Chiefs’, *Daily Herald*, 30 May 1936, p. 3; ‘Women Who Change Sex’, *Daily Sketch*, 30 May 1936, p. 8; ‘Changed Sex Sequel’, *Daily Express*, 1 August 1936, p. 9; ‘Women Athletes Tackle that “Man-Woman” Problem’, *Daily Mirror*, 10 August 1936, p. 7; ‘Man-Woman Athletes Test Decision’, *Daily Mirror*, 11 August 1936, p. 2; ‘Cloud over Olympic Games’, *News Chronicle*, 11 August 1936, p. 1.
- [3] ‘Women Who Change Sex’, *Daily Sketch*, 30 May 1936, p. 8.
- [4] Alison Oram (2007) *Her Husband was a Woman!: women's gender crossing in modern British popular culture* (London: Routledge), pp. 109–110. Alison Oram (2011) ‘Farewell to Frocks’—‘Sex Change’ in Interwar Britain: newspaper, stories,

- medical technology and modernity, in Kate Fisher & Sarah Toulalan (Eds) *Bodies, Sex and Desire from the Renaissance to the Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 102–117, pp. 102–108.
- [5] Adrian Bingham (2004) *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 12.
- [6] Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (2010) *Managing the Body: beauty, health, and fitness in Britain 1880–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 241.
- [7] Vanessa Heggie (2010) Testing Sex and Gender in Sports; Reinventing, Reimagining and Reconstructing Histories, *Endeavour*, 34, pp. 157–163, p. 157.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- [9] 'Sex change' and 'change of sex' were the terms employed in the press articles and they reflect the notions of sex being put forward in the 1930s. 'Sex change' in this article does not connote its current meaning as a synonym for gender confirmation surgery, a problematic usage that is simplistic and places undue attention on surgery as an aspect of trans* experience.
- [10] Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain*, p. 3.
- [11] Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) *Sexing the Body: gender politics and the construction of sexuality* (New York: Basic Books), pp. 3–5.
- [12] Transgender and intersex studies have offered valuable insights regarding the tendency to treat sex as an immutable category. For example: Ellen K. Feder (2014) *Making Sense of Intersex: changing ethical perspectives in biomedicine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press); Joanne Meyerowitz (2002) *How Sex Changed: a history of transsexuality in the United States* (London: Harvard University Press); Elizabeth Reis (2009) *Bodies in Doubt: an American history of intersex* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press); Susan Stryker (2008) *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press).
- [13] Nellie Oudshoorn (1994) *Beyond the Natural Body: an archaeology of sex hormones* (London: Routledge), p. 39; Chandak Sengoopta (2006) *The Most Secret Quintessence of Life* (London: University of Chicago Press), p. 118.
- [14] 'Change of Sex', *Time*, 24 August 1936, p. 33.
- [15] 'Miss Mary is now Mr. Mark', *Daily Express*, 29 May 1936, p. 19.
- [16] 'Man-Woman Finds New Life "Very Startling"', *People*, 31 May 1936, p. 3.
- [17] 'Woman Athlete Who Has Become a Man', *Western Evening Herald*, 28 May 1936, p. 7; 'Woman Changed to Man Faces Life Anew', *Daily Herald*, 29 May 1936, p. 1; 'Doctors and Sex Changes', *Daily Mail*, 29 May 1936, p. 6; "'Girl" Athlete's New Life after Change of Sex', *News of the World*, 31 May 1936, p. 3.
- [18] "'Girl" Athlete's New Life after Change of Sex', *News of the World*, 31 May 1936, p. 3; 'Man-Woman Finds New Life "Very Startling"', *People*, 31 May 1936, p. 3.
- [19] "'She" Now a Man', *Daily Mirror*, 29 May 1936, p. 6; 'Woman Who Has Become a Man', *Daily Sketch*, 29 May 1936, p. 3; 'Miss Mary is now Mr. Mark', *Daily Express*, 29 May 1936, p. 19.
- [20] 'Women Athletes Tackle That "Man-Woman" Problem', *Daily Mirror*, 10 August 1936, p. 7.
- [21] [Untitled], *Manchester Guardian*, 1 March 1932, p. 4.
- [22] 'This Woman Will Be a Man Next Week', *Daily Mirror*, 15 April 1937, p. 23.
- [23] Spellings of his name vary; I am using 'Zdenek Koubek' throughout for consistency, except where I am quoting directly.
- [24] "'Girl" Athlete's New Life after Change of Sex', *News of the World*, 31 May 1936, p. 3.
- [25] 'Woman Changed to Man Faces Life Anew', *Daily Herald*, 29 May 1936, p. 1.
- [26] Jennifer Hargreaves (1994) *Sporting Females: critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports* (London: Routledge), pp. 216–217.
- [27] Allen Guttmann (1984) *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic movement* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 194.

- [28] Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, p. 34; 'Man-Woman Athlete to Appear in Revue', *Daily Mirror*, 23 July 1936, p. 8.
- [29] Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, pp. 34, 295 n. 65. Drawing on articles from the *New York Daily Mirror*, Meyerowitz describes Koubek's stage show as a tableau vivant in which he ran on a treadmill in pursuit of a woman. There is scant evidence as to how this was received by audiences.
- [30] 'Man-Woman Athlete', *Daily Mirror*, 18 November 1936, p. 3.
- [31] Alison Oram argues that the press covered accounts of 'sex change' as part of a lineage of 'freak' shows and astonishing marvels. Following this argument, Koubek's stage show could be seen as him presenting himself as a 'freak' as part of this tradition. Oram, "Farewell to Frocks", pp. 111–114. It is striking that Weston is also reported to have received offers to appear on stage, although I have only found this reported in the Australian press, not the British: 'Change of Sex', *Western Mail*, 17 September 1936, p. 28. There is a suggestion here that Weston's embodiment was seen to be a spectacle.
- [32] As accounts of changes in sex travelled, they were subsequently picked up by interested parties elsewhere. Willy de Bruijn had, as Elvira de Bruijn, been a champion woman cyclist in 1930s Belgium. He cited press stories about Koubek's change of sex as the inspiration for him seeking his own reassignment from female to male. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, pp. 33–34; 'Another Sportswoman Changes Sex', *Dundee Evening Telegraph and Post*, 21 April 1937, p. 7.
- [33] 'This Woman Will Be a Man Next Week', *Daily Mirror*, 15 April 1937, p. 23; 'Woman Athlete to Change Sex', *News Chronicle*, 15 April 1937, p. 3; 'Change of Sex', *News of the World*, 18 April 1937, p. 9; 'Woman Athlete to Change Sex', *Daily Mail*, 15 April 1937, p. 6. The British press reports did not state what name Smetkovna subsequently went under as a man, but the Australian press gave the male name Witold Smetek: 'Woman-Man Wants to Be Woman Again', *Mirror*, 6 May 1939, p. 13.
- [34] 'Woman Athlete to Change Sex', *Daily Mail*, 15 April 1937, p. 6; 'Woman Athlete to Change Sex', *News Chronicle*, 15 April 1937, p. 3; 'Change of Sex', *News of the World*, 18 April 1937, p. 9.
- [35] 'Woman Athlete to Change Sex', *News Chronicle*, 15 April 1937, p. 3.
- [36] 'Woman Athlete to Change Sex', *Daily Mail*, 15 April, 1937, p. 6.
- [37] This is not to say that all those whose change from female to male status was reported in the press were involved with sport—a variety of occupations were represented. However, connections between 'sex change' and sport were reiterated and these references accumulated to suggest an association between the two.
- [38] 'Woman-Man Wants to Be Woman Again', *Mirror*, 6 May 1939, p. 13.
- [39] *Ibid.*
- [40] Mike Huggins has shown how cinema newsreels reached a large audience and had a role to play in shaping how audiences viewed women's sport. Mike Huggins (2007) 'And Now, Something for the Ladies': representations of women's sport in cinema newsreels 1918–1939, *Women's History Review*, 16, pp. 681–700, pp. 686–687.
- [41] British Pathé (1937) Meet the Girl Who Became a Man. <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/meet-the-girl-who-became-a-man-aka-a-woman-who-bec> (accessed 31 January 2014).
- [42] Claire Langhamer (2000) *Women's Leisure in England 1920–60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 79–80; Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (2011) The Making of a Modern Female Body: beauty, health and fitness in interwar Britain, *Women's History Review*, 20, pp. 299–317, p. 310.
- [43] 'Sex Changed', *Northern Star*, 27 September 1937, p. 7.
- [44] Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, p. 113; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Making of a Modern Female Body', p. 301; Fiona Skillen (2013) *Women, Sport and Modernity in Interwar Britain* (Oxford: Peter Lang).

- [45] Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain*, p. 74; Huggins, 'And Now, Something for the Ladies', p. 695. Skillen, *Women, Sport and Modernity in Interwar Britain*, pp. 230–231.
- [46] For example, in 1926 Gertrude Ederle attracted a great deal of press attention when she beat male records in her swim across the English Channel.
- [47] The titles of this selection of opinion pieces on women and sport give a flavour of the different debates: 'Lady Schwabe, Women to Dominate the World?', *Manchester Evening News*, 13 January 1932, p. 3; Charles Hart, 'Encourage Our Girl Athletes!', *Daily Mirror*, 13 July 1933; Geoffrey Soutar, 'Amazons of 1934—A Mere Man's View', *Daily Mirror*, 21 May 1934, p. 10; Ralph A. Hewins, 'Is it Bad for Them?', *Daily Mirror*, 9 August 1934, p. 10; Andrew Sharpe, 'Records or Babies', *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1938, p. 29; Diana Benham, 'Record Breaking Doesn't Bar Babies', *Daily Mirror*, 18 July 1938, p. 25; Diana Benham, 'Games are Good for Business Girls', *Daily Mirror*, 28 September 1938, p. 27.
- [48] The National Archives (TNA): Public Records Office (PRO) ED 113/49 8 March 1939, p. 2. National Advisory Council for Physical Training and Recreation Medical Sub-Committee on the Desirability of Athletics for Women and Girls.
- [49] Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, p. 173.
- [50] L. R. Broster, Clifford Allen, H. W. C. Vines, Jocelyn Patterson, Alan W. Greenwood, G. F. Marrian & G. C. Butler (1938) *The Adrenal Cortex and Intersexuality* (London: Chapman & Hall), p. ix.
- [51] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- [52] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- [53] *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.
- [54] *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- [55] *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- [56] *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- [57] *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- [58] *Ibid.*, pp. 115–116.
- [59] Heggie, 'Testing Sex and Gender in Sports', p. 158.
- [60] *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- [61] *Ibid.*, p. 158.
- [62] Helen Lenskyj (1986) *Out of Bounds: women, sport and sexuality* (Toronto: The Women's Press), p. 87.
- [63] Pat Griffin (1998) *Strong Women, Deep Closets: lesbians and homophobia in sport* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), pp. 18–20; Susan K. Cahn (1994) *Coming on Strong: gender and sexuality in twentieth-century women's sport* (New York: The Free Press), p. 175.
- [64] Ian Ritchie (2003) Sex Tested, Gender Verified: controlling female sexuality in the age of containment, *Sport History Review*, 34, pp. 80–98, pp. 85, 92.
- [65] Paul Gallico (1988 [1938]) *Farewell to Sport* (London: Simon & Schuster), pp. 233–234.
- [66] A journalist for the *Los Angeles Times* put up an affronted tone at the Poles' suggestion that Stephens was a man, but did not neglect to remind readers that Koubek and Weston had competed as women before their changes of sex: 'Polish Writer Calls Helen Stephens "Man"', *Los Angeles Times*, 6 August 1936, pp. 9, 14; 'Sex Rears Its Ugly Head and Sports Columnist Finds Himself in Trouble', *Los Angeles Times*, 8 August 1936, p. 13. On Stella Walsh, see Heggie, 'Testing Sex and Gender in Sports'; Kutte Jönsson (2007) Who's Afraid of Stella Walsh? On Gender, 'Gene Cheaters', and the Promise of Cyborg Athletes, *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 1, pp. 239–262; Jaime Schultz (2012) Disciplining Sex: 'gender verification' policies and women's sport, in Helen Jefferson Lenskyj & Stephen Wagg (Eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Olympic Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 443–460.

- [67] 'Changed Sex Sequel', *Daily Express*, 1 August 1936, p. 9.
- [68] 'Women Athletes Tackle That "Man-Woman" Problem', *Daily Mirror*, 10 August 1936, p. 7; 'Man-Woman Athletes Test Decision', *Daily Mirror*, 11 August 1936, p. 2; 'Cloud over Olympic Games', *News Chronicle*, 11 August 1936, p. 1.
- [69] 'Women Athletes Tackle That "Man-Woman" Problem', *Daily Mirror*, 10 August 1936, p. 7.
- [70] 'Marriage: by man who was a woman', *Sunday Dispatch*, 31 May 1936, p. 7.
- [71] 'Lipstick Atlantas in Olympic Games', *Daily Mail*, 4 August 1936, p. 9.
- [72] Historians have noted the ways in which women have had to present themselves in line with a feminine ideal in order to garner public approval. Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain*, p. 74; Huggins, "And Now, Something for the Ladies", p. 695; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The Making of a Modern Female Body', p. 301.
- [73] 'Lipstick Atlantas in Olympic Games', *Daily Mail*, 4 August 1936, p. 9.
- [74] 'Olympic Games', *Time*, 10 August 1936, p. 42.
- [75] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- [76] Personal correspondence with the archivists at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, January 2013.
- [77] On coverage of Caster Semenya, see, for example, Jennifer Doyle (2013) *Dirt off Her Shoulders*, *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 19, pp. 419–433; Kathryn Henne (2014) 'The "Science" of Fair Play in Sport: gender and the politics of testing', *Signs*, 39, pp. 787–212; Zine Magubane (2014) 'Spectacles and Scholarship: Caster Semenya, intersex studies and the problem of race in feminist theory', *Signs*, 39, pp. 761–785; Mandy Merck (2010) 'The Question of Caster Semenya', *Radical Philosophy*, 160, pp. 2–7.
- [78] Gallico, *Farewell to Sport*, p. 233.