

# Busting the Myth: May the Best Person Win



By Stephen F. Gambescia

We often marvel at the record-breaking accomplishments of professional athletes. But regardless of what sports, sociocultural, political and business commentators say about which athlete was faster and stronger or went higher in an event, there will always be one stark question about the athlete's performance: whether it was a men's or women's event.

I think it's time we question why elite athletes in non-contact sports are divided. In everyday life, divisions between men and women based on antiquated concepts of performance capabilities are breaking down. We are at a remarkable time of erasing the male/female divide for performance capabilities in this country. Most visible is a woman securing a presidential nomination from a major political party. A striking change has been our military's combat units opening up to women to join. While women have always played a significant role in the workplace, they are now repre-

sented in occupations from astronaut to welder. Why should sports be any different?

Naturally, we all understand there are anatomical differences between men and women. However, when comparing abilities, especially at the elite sport level, we are talking about matters of degree of performance, not matters of principle in gender.

For example, a 6-foot-6 person (male or female) would easily outperform a 5-foot-5 person (male or female) in dunking a basketball. The reason is simply a matter of performance capability — not a matter of gender.

However, being male or female has no significant bearing on how one will perform in most non-contact sports. Is there a gender difference in principle for how one performs in archery, badminton, canoeing, diving, equestrian competitions or fencing? The list could go on. Why do men and women continue to compete separately in such events?

One could argue that sociocultural constructs have historically favored men in certain sports. But arguments-based on

characteristics other than gender for who performs well in a sport have proven to be weak. For example, the notion that African Americans "don't play golf" or that African Americans "are not good at" ice hockey or swimming have proven to be nonsense.

Even if sociocultural forces are strong for some sports, have we not advanced enough to look past stereotypes? Let's take a close look at the real gender segregation in sport. It appears that the arguments for separate competition for men and women in sports are a contradiction to the "no significant difference" rationale that has allowed women to erase any dividing lines.

There should be no dividing men and women in terms of what they do at home and work. Let's add play to this. In the future, we should be wishing elite athletes well with, "May the best person win!"

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