

Ripping up the rulebook: Challenges and opportunities in moving beyond the binary.

Hannah J. H. Newman, Gemma L. Witcomb, Loughborough University, UK

Abstract

Sex-segregated sporting competitions pose impossible barriers to some gender diverse people. Within some sports, such segregation serves little purpose. Thus, different ways of categorising participants should be explored in order to facilitate inclusive participation for all. This chapter examines an all-gender-inclusive strength athletics event, *Limitless*, that was developed to provide an opportunity for people of all gender identities to train and compete, with competition categorisation based on ability level. Interviews (n = 10) with competitors and spectators following the inaugural competition revealed that the all-gender inclusive event was evaluated very positively. However, the four themes identified (challenging the binary versus further marginalisation, support and blind acceptance, fear of diminishing women's achievements, and overwhelming challenge) highlight the complexity of events that challenge the gender and/or sex binaries in sport, and the many misconceptions and challenges that accompany discussions around gender identity and sport. The second *Limitless* competition attracted a large number of cisgender competitors, suggesting that non-sex segregated participation is appealing to all and may be one way to increase general sports participation and activity levels. In conclusion we suggest that increased attention needs to be paid to organising events that are inclusive of all gender identities in order to further normalisation and use as a vehicle for social change.

Keywords: non-binary, sex-segregation, transgender, inclusion, strength

Introduction

The number of people identifying as transgender or non-binary is increasing in the UK (Fielding & Bass, 2018) and worldwide (Arcelus et al., 2015). While these individuals continue to face stigma and discrimination, often perpetuated by misrepresentations in the media (Knott-Fayle et al, under submission), there is a gradual acceptance that sex assigned at birth (based on physical sexual characteristics) may not match the gender with which a person identifies. While this acceptance is positive and has influenced developments such as proposed reforms to the UK Gender Recognition Act (Government Equalities Office, 2018),

it does raise a number of important issues that are more difficult to reconcile. One of these is participation in sport and the premise of fairness, on which the need for sex-segregation is often based, and which serves to undermine transgender and non-binary people's right to participate.

In some competitive sports, attributes believed to be central to performance are used to group athletes into different categories. For example, weight categories in boxing and wrestling or handicaps in golf. In some sports, athletes are sometimes also segregated by age (e.g., junior, senior, and masters' categories). Such categorisations are often essential and sensible to ensure that athletes are set against each other in equitable ways. However, in most sports (e.g., boxing, WBA 2019), these are secondary-level categorisations. The primary categorisation has happened prior to this; silently and without question. That is the categorisation based on sex.

Sex-segregation occurs in many sports (see further Schultz, Chapter 2). It is argued that where there are physiological advantages of the male body that render mixed-sex competition inequitable for women, and/or pose an unacceptable risk of injury (Pike, 2020), sex-segregated categories are essential for ensuring fair and meaningful participation in the female category. However, it is also the case that in many instances within sport, for example in instances where there is no clear physiological advantage or disadvantage, sex-segregation is largely a result of historical sociocultural norms which have served to uphold traditional gender orders, often sexualising women's sports (Boykoff & Yasouka, 2015) and consequently maintained its perceived sanctity as a male preserve (Schultz, 2018; Hargreaves, 1994). Consequently, sex-segregation is deeply engrained in how we organise and practice sports (Anderson, 2008) to the extent that sport can be considered the last powerful institution upholding discriminatory, sexist ideologies (Milner & Braddock, 2016).

The sex-segregation of sport causes particular problems for transgender people. For transgender women, and to a lesser extent transgender men, concerns that birth-sex physiology and puberty (Handelsman, 2017) may provide unfair advantages (depending on the sport) compared to their cisgender¹ competitors serves to exclude them from participating

¹ In this chapter, we use the term cisgender to refer to those people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth (i.e., those who are not transgender), and other than incidences where we

in their identified gender category (**See Chapter xxx**). The situation is even more desperate for non-binary people, who have no category to participate in at all, or are forced to choose between competing in a men's or women's category based on which causes them less discomfort, and whether policies and regulations allow them to. This is not only uncomfortable due to the feelings of invalidation and being misgendered (Johnson et al., 2020), but can also raise the same issues with fairness, particularly if prescribed testosterone is being used as part of medical transition, due to it being a regulated substance (World Anti-Doping Agency, 2018).

Increasingly, suggestions of how sports can be more fully inclusive of transgender people have looked towards a total re-envisioning of competition that sees sex-segregation eradicated (e.g., Kerr & Obel, 2017). Another example is Harper's (2017) suggestion that all athletes are subject to a scientifically determined performance-based metric that assigns them an "athletic gender". This may or may not align with their experienced gender, but this is not important if athletic gender is merely for participation purposes, and it is accepted that this does not affect self-identified and lived gender outside of the sporting arena. While this is a plausible possibility, for many individuals an incongruence between sporting-life and lived-life categories would be psychologically uncomfortable (Elling-Machartzki, 2017). Another sex- and gender-neutral classification idea suggested by Shin (2017) is to categorise athletes based on bioavailable testosterone, resulting in groups of high and low testosterone classes. However, this classification suggests that higher levels of testosterone result in greater athletic ability, which is widely debated, and the evidence suggests is wrongly misunderstood (Jordan-Young & Karkazis, 2019). A further possibility that may only be applicable to some individual sports is to classify athletes according to their capabilities, within a totally sex and gender-free arena.

The concept of performance-related categorisation is not new. Indeed, one only has to look to the Paralympics to see a functioning example of how such categorisation takes place. In para-sports, participants are categorised according to their functional movement capabilities, irrespective of sex. The Paralympics is a beacon of social inclusion and is the world's third biggest sporting event (after the Olympics and FIFA World cup). Indeed, the 2016 Rio

distinguish between non-binary and binary transgender people, we use the term transgender as an umbrella term to refer to those people whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Paralympic Games saw 4,328 athletes from 159 countries, compete in 22 sports, with a TV audience of 4.1 billion people in more than 150 countries, and 2.15 million tickets sold (International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2020). Clearly, meaningful categorisations that allow for fair competition can take place irrespective of sex, and arguably able-bodied sport could be drawing upon some of these alternatives. This has been previously suggested by Kerr and Obel (2017) who used the example of the change in disability sport from a medical to a functional classification system to propose a model for able-bodied sport which involves classifying bodies based on functional ability across multiple traits as an alternative to sex segregation.

Thus, we argue that categorisations based on other attributes related to performance, rather than sex and/or gender as the primary and only categorisation, have three important advantages. Firstly, for applicable sports, it does not undermine the principles of fair and equitable participation for women, since participants are grouped according to ability. Secondly, by removing sex-segregation, it equalises the disparity (in importance, attention, funding etc.) observed between male and female sports, thereby elevating the status of female sports. Finally, and importantly, the removal of sex-segregated categories opens the door for the participation of individuals of all gender identities, without the need for regulations to dictate under what circumstances (i.e., medical interventions) participation is permitted. The emergence of a small number of grassroots level sporting competitions that are not sex-segregated, such as the one that forms the focus of this chapter, can provide valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities that arise when sex and/or gender is not the primary principle in the categorisation of athletes.

In this chapter we describe a sporting event, *Limitless*, that has embraced the idea of performance-related categorisation of athletes, and was developed to promote participation of all genders, with no sex-segregation. Conceived and organised by the first author, in this chapter we provide a personal account of the coming of the event, followed by the findings of a qualitative investigation into the attitudes and opinions of those who took part or were spectators at the inaugural *Limitless* event in 2018.

Limitless

Limitless is a competition based on a sport usually referred to as Strongman (or Strongwoman). Less commonly, the sport is referred to by the gender-neutral term strength athletics, which is the term we use in this chapter. Strength athletics is probably most well-known for its *World's Strongest Man* competition, which was established in 1977, and has been televised in a number of different countries, including the UK and USA. Strength athletics tests competitors' physical capacity in several different ways. A typical competition consists of 4-6 strength and power-based events which may vary between competitions, but typically are a combination of static tests of strength (such as the deadlift and overhead press), with more dynamic tests of strength (which combine strength, power, speed, and endurance; for example, the farmers walk, and the vehicle pull).

Limitless arose through my own (first author) search for spaces to compete in strength-sports as a non-binary person. At the point of coming out as non-binary and beginning to take masculinising hormone treatment, I had been competing in strongwoman competitions for three to four years. Strength athletics is a relatively small sport with no official governing body, and so there were no formal rules or policies in place that would have necessarily stopped me from continuing to compete in strongwoman events. However, I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable with having to be prescribed a female label in order to compete in such events. Therefore, I decided to distance myself from strongwoman, and women's sport more broadly. However, this meant I struggled to find spaces to compete that felt right for me, having to choose between men's and women's categories, neither of which felt like a good fit. After discussions with my coach (who is also the owner of the strength and conditioning gym I was training out of), about my options and the lack of potential spaces for me to compete, we decided to host a competition at the gym that would be inclusive to anyone, regardless of their gender. *Limitless* was the result.

Limitless adopts the traditional format of a strength athletics competition (4-6 events, such as those described previously). However, instead of having 'men's' and 'women's' categories for competitors, there are three ability-based categories - Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 - which increase in difficulty. In Level 1, competitors are required to lift the lightest weights, getting heavier for Level 2, and in Level 3 competitors are required to lift the heaviest weights. Anyone of any gender can enter any of the levels. Each competitor simply enters the category that best suits their ability-level, based on the prescribed weights to be lifted in each

event. Entry level is self-selected, which is a standard entry procedure across most novice and intermediate level strength athletics competitions (Newman, 2020).

Limitless is held annually at a strength and conditioning gym in the Midlands, UK. The inaugural *Limitless* was held in 2018 and the venue is a strength-sport focused gym, open to anyone on a membership basis, that is primarily equipped for functional fitness, strength athletics, powerlifting, and Olympic weightlifting activities. *Limitless* is promoted via social media as a sporting event open to anyone, regardless of gender/sex, and hence, inclusive of all genders. In terms of competitor numbers, the inaugural *Limitless* was small. There were eight competitors; two non-binary people (one being the first author of this chapter), one genderfluid person, three cisgender women and two cisgender men competing across Levels 1 and 2. There were no entries for Level 3. The second competition, held in 2019, attracted a much larger 33 competitors across the three ability-based categories, the majority of whom were cisgender.

In the remainder of this chapter, we analyse competitor and spectator attitudes and opinions of *Limitless* using data from interviews that were conducted following the inaugural competition in 2018.

Opportunities and challenges: Competitor and spectator attitudes and opinions of *Limitless*

Despite the small number of competitors, the inaugural *Limitless* competition garnered much interest, both on social media² and from spectators on the day. While all positive, we were interested in discovering more about both competitors' and spectators' attitudes and opinions of the event. While these data would be useful for understanding how the competition could be improved in future years, the main aim was to explore what individuals really thought about the concepts of non-sex segregated events, all-gender inclusive sports, and fairness in sport in relation to gender beliefs.

² For novice and intermediate strength athletics events, Facebook is the primary platform for the promotion and advertisement of competitions (Newman, 2020). *Limitless* was advertised across the gym's social media channels, as well as within popular strongman and strongwoman Facebook groups.

Thus, we conducted ten semi-structured interviews with competitors and spectators, including six of the other seven competitors on the day (excluding the first author), and four spectators. The six competitors interviewed consisted of three cisgender women, one cisgender man, one non-binary person, and one genderfluid person, with a mean age of 38.8 years. The four spectators interviewed were all cisgender women, with a mean age of 34.3 years. The interview asked participants questions related to 1) their participation and interest in the *Limitless* event, 2) the perceived success of the event, 3) their understanding or experiences of barriers to participation related to gender identity, and 4) their opinions on how sport can be more inclusive of gender diverse athletes.

The interviews were conducted by the first author in June and July 2018 (1-2 months post-competition) following ethical approval from Loughborough University ethics committee. Where possible, interviews were conducted in person at the gym where the competition was held. Where this was not possible, the interviews were conducted via telephone. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each, were transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis. Four themes were identified that highlight the complexity of sporting events that challenge the gender and/or sex binaries in sport. These themes are *challenging the binary versus further marginalisation* – which explores the potential trade-off between further inclusion and further segregation from mainstream sport that participants felt may occur through the development of events such as *Limitless*; *support and blind acceptance* – which demonstrates the overwhelming support participants showed both for *Limitless* and broader inclusion of gender and/or sex diverse athletes, despite some admitting having never given the topic much previous thought; *fear for diminishing women's achievements* – which presents concerns some participants had around less sex-segregation in sport and the impact it may have for female athletes; and finally *overwhelming challenge* – which conveys the weight of the challenge participants felt in attempting to reconcile potential conflicts between their two positions of overwhelming support for the inclusion of gender and/or sex diverse athletes, and the fears of some for women's achievements. In this section of the chapter, we use these identified themes to further explore and discuss competitor and spectator attitudes and opinions of the inaugural *Limitless* competition.

Challenging the binary versus further marginalisation

This theme explores the potential trade-off between further inclusion in mainstream sport and further segregation from mainstream sport that participants felt could occur for gender and/or sex diverse participants through the development of more events, such as *Limitless*, that are not sex-segregated. When asked about their opinions of all-gender inclusion in sport, participants were overall supportive of less sex-segregation, acknowledging the complexity and difficulty in providing opportunities for gender and/or sex diverse competitors in sex-segregated categories. When discussing the potential benefits of less sex-segregated sport, spectator Clara highlighted its importance for inclusion:

‘It’s just nice to be competing with anyone. And the best thing about it for me is you’re not excluding people because the more rules and stipulations you put on, you know not just that male, female, weight category whatever else, each time you make a segregation you are excluding some people. And that’s the thing do we actually want to be incorporating more and more rules? We should be encouraging people to compete.’ *Clara, spectator, cisgender woman.*

Clara’s focus here appears to be on grassroots participation, and encouraging more people to take part, rather than elite sport. Many sporting organisations and governing bodies are now distinguishing between recreational and elite sport in their transgender inclusion policies (e.g., England and Wales Cricket Board, 2020). Clara’s supportive view of less sex-segregated sport was also echoed by Susan (*spectator, cisgender woman*), who said: ‘It keeps everybody included, that to me is the most important thing not just in sport but in life in general... if those divides are taken down everybody can get involved.’ Speaking specifically about *Limitless*, Susan also discussed the potential resistance to less sex-segregated sport and the importance of awareness and visibility in breaking down barriers to the inclusion of gender and/or sex diverse people in sport:

‘I think there were a few people there that weren’t sure what to expect or how it was going to be and I think it definitely helped open other people’s eyes and obviously it got quite a lot of social media attention which was fantastic. I didn’t see any negative comments or feedback from it so I just think, hopefully you used a really good platform there to get your point across so to speak and you did. Everybody enjoyed it and I think for the people that were there and did look at it

on social media it's broken down some barriers for them to know, you know, that it is okay to talk about it.' *Susan, spectator, cisgender woman.*

Susan's suggestion here that some may need encouragement to talk about topics around the participation of gender and/or sex diverse people in sport is perhaps a sign of the highly contested and polarised views around transgender issues in the UK at the time (Peel & Newman, 2020); that the topic is as such seen as 'taboo' or that conversations about it are difficult to have. Other difficulties in implementing less sex-segregated sport were expressed by participants, even though they were supportive of it. Tom, a competitor, expressed support for the categorisation of athletes in strength athletics by ability, but also drew attention to the potential difficulties in moderating who enters which category. However, he did also allude to this being a difficulty for strength athletics more broadly, including in other sex-segregated competitions:

'It does work completely. You know, whether or not there should be some sort of, if the event was to become a very large event, you know some sort of qualifying. Just something like that where people- or they've got to show past competitions that are done or show how they competed there and then that way of like gauging it... it's the way that people in general may not stand by their abilities... that's, you know, the sport and industry in general, you know, not something that's a reflection on *Limitless* as I feel it did work really well with the weight categories.' *Tom, competitor, cisgender man.*

Whilst supportive of less sex-segregated sport, and of the categorisation of athletes by ability level, spectator Emma expressed concern as to how far the concept could go beyond smaller, less mainstream sporting events such as *Limitless*, due to the focus on money in elite sport and the financial implications of restructuring a sport in such a radical way:

'To be honest I think it's going to have some limits, but purely because of the money involved in certain sport. Particularly like football and things like that, the amount of money that goes into it and to make it a certain thing. It would be interesting to see how that develops over the next few years to be honest... It's so money driven sometimes like the essence of sport and the person who is doing the sport is lost really isn't it?' *Emma, spectator, cisgender woman.*

Overall, the sense from both competitors and spectators was that they were supportive of a move towards less sex-segregated sport, and were supportive of the ability-based model of categorisation used in *Limitless*. However, they also anticipated both logistical difficulties and resistance from others in the introduction of less sex-segregated sport on a wider scale, particularly in elite and mainstream sport settings. It was recognised by some participants that sporting events with less sex/gender segregation are mostly smaller, non-mainstream sports as opposed to high profile mainstream sports. Hari (*competitor, genderfluid*) listed some examples: ‘There are some sports where the teams are mixed, like Quidditch... Ultimate Frisbee... Roller Derby... but none of them are mainstream’. This is arguably reflective of the potential challenges in the scope to develop less sex-segregated sport identified by Emma earlier in this theme. In smaller, non-mainstream sports there is often fewer financial implications to restructuring competitions, and their often less organised and less governed nature means there is more freedom for organisers to structure their events in different ways. Karen (*competitor, cisgender woman*) also raised a point pertaining to the potential difficulties when sports and/or sporting events are high profile as opposed to when they are non-mainstream and lesser known, including the potential for competitors to take advantage of inclusive policies for reasons of competitive advantage: ‘I guess in the elite level and national elite levels sort of, it’s a bit different because people will unfortunately try and take advantage in every which way they can... you know at top levels of sport that’s what they’ll do.’

If the inclusion of gender diversity via less sex-segregation is restricted to smaller, non-mainstream sports, one potential concern raised from this is the notion of further marginalisation; that gender and sex diverse people who wish to engage in sport are confined to small, non-mainstream sports and/or events and are further segregated from mainstream sport. One high profile example of a sporting event designed to have an inclusive environment specifically for LGBTQ+ people is the Gay Games (Federation of Gay Games, 2020). Events such as these often provide a safe space for gender and/or sex diverse people to engage in sport, something which has been found to be a facilitator to transgender sport and exercise engagement (Jones, Arcelus, Bouman et al., 2017), but can also be viewed by some as a way of further segregating or marginalising gender and/or sex diverse people in sport and exercise.

Emma, a spectator, though, suggested that further marginalisation and/or segregation does not need to be the case in the emergence of events such as *Limitless*, describing how at the event the notion of ‘difference’ was not prominent, and instead the focus was on competing in the event, just as in any other sporting venture:

‘We knew it was a competition organised in a different way, but it wasn’t made a big deal of on the day, does that make sense? So this is a competition that is based on ability, we know the reasons why it’s been organised in this way, but actually we’re just going to enjoy it for what it is, and that’s what I liked about it. The whole point of making it inclusive is not by saying “oh we’re different because of these reasons”, we’re just here to do lifting and putting back down and that’s what everyone did, and it was fun.’ *Emma, spectator, cisgender woman.*

For Tom, a competitor, the organisation of *Limitless* as a non-gendered competition that was designed to be inclusive of gender and sex diverse competitors caused some internal conflict and discomfort as to what his place could be in an event organised that way:

‘I felt that with being just a white male of yeah, you know, the average Joe in the UK so to speak, going up against, like having to go up against female or transgender people I felt like I didn’t know what my place was, do you know what I mean?’ *Tom, competitor, cisgender man.*

This alludes to the potential for events organised in this way to be perceived as ‘events only for transgender people’ as opposed to ‘events for anyone’, a perception that would increase the potential for further marginalisation, and a notion that we discuss further in the conclusion of this chapter. Overall then competitors and spectators interviewed perceived less sex-segregated sport as having both potential positives for the inclusion of gender and/or sex diverse athletes through its challenging of the binary, but also potential negatives of further marginalisation and segregation if events are perceived only to be for those athletes.

Support and blind acceptance

This theme explores the overwhelming support that participants showed both for *Limitless* and the broader inclusion of gender and/or sex diverse athletes in sport, despite some

admitting having never given the topic much previous thought prior to their involvement in the event. Overall, there was a positive response to the competition from both competitors and spectators, who described it as a successful event with an inclusive, supportive atmosphere. For both Alex and Hari, *Limitless* was their first experience of competing in a strength-based competition, and both had minimal involvement with strength-sport prior to the event. Alex (*competitor, non-binary*) described the spirit they felt amongst competitors and spectators as a key part of their experience of the day: ‘it was pretty impressive and yeah just the whole way it was set up it was really interesting. The communal spirit, although it’s a solo sport it doesn’t feel like a solo sport. Yeah the whole thing was just really good fun.’ This sentiment was echoed by Hari, who described the support they received from other competitors and spectators at the event:

‘The atmosphere was amazing. Everybody was supportive, everybody was just happy to be there. They didn’t care how much you lifted, it didn’t matter how small you are, how big you are, everyone was going to cheer you on the same amount. Everyone was really nice and accommodating.’ *Hari, competitor, genderfluid.*

Clara (*spectator, cisgender woman*) expressed her support for the concept and structure of *Limitless* as being categorised by ability level as opposed to gender: ‘it doesn’t matter who you are, what you are, how heavy you are. Your own levels. If you want to have a go at that level it doesn’t matter. Just have a go.’ Laura, also a spectator at the event, further highlighted how she felt this structure helped to place emphasis on what she felt mattered more, the physical task at hand and the ability to complete it, rather than ‘who you are’ as a competitor:

‘I’m all for it I think it was great, it was brilliant, and it was nice to get loads of different people together... I think that it worked really well because it is about the weight and it’s about your ability rather than who you are or what you are... If you know you can lift that weight it doesn’t discriminate or doesn’t target anyone in particular, just it’s your level isn’t it, your strength level.’ *Laura, spectator, cisgender woman.*

Laura’s focus here on ability and the physical task at hand alludes to the perception that strength athletics lends itself particularly well to an ability-based model in that it is an individual, non-contact sport and is relatively objective – i.e., you can either lift a weight (for

example 100 kilograms) or you cannot. Other sports may have different challenges – for example, ability-level may be more subjective. A sport like football could be one example of this, where it is common for there to be disagreements between people and their judgements as to who is the best player in a certain position. It could be argued that in these cases there is potential for the discrimination on the basis of sex and/or gender that Laura feels the ability-based model can help eradicate, as it could be disguised as ability-based selections. In other sports though, where ability-level can be measured using more objective performance-related markers, such as the weight lifted in strength athletics or qualifying times for a 100-metre race for example, this may be less of a concern.

Laura also indicated that the inclusive atmosphere of the event is in line with strength athletics as a sport more generally, which is known to have a strong sense of community (Newman, 2020). This suggests that the differing structure of categorisation of *Limitless* did not detract from what is widely deemed as one of the key characteristics of the sport more widely, its community spirit and support:

‘My first competition I did, I did not know what to expect... Everybody had said about the inclusiveness and the support and everybody helps everybody. Until you go to a competition or get involved you don’t really get that until you’re part of it... By the end of the competition you’ve made new friends and you’ve got contacts, and everybody knows your name, and everybody is cheering for everyone and it’s such a weird but really nice experience.’ *Laura, spectator, cisgender woman.*

This level of support and community spirit is something that is expressed as surprising to some who have not been involved in strength athletics before, which could be posited as being because of its ‘intimidating’ exterior, as it was labelled by Alex. This surprise was demonstrated by spectator Susan:

‘The atmosphere surprised me. I know it was a competition, but it didn’t feel like a competition because everybody was having so much fun and enjoying themselves and cheering each other on even if it was cheering the person that could’ve won or beat you but people still cheering them on. Cheering on people that I’ve never met before but just everybody was cheering on people they didn’t know.’ *Susan, spectator, cisgender woman.*

The positive response to the event was, therefore, demonstrated by both the competitors and spectators that we interviewed after the inaugural *Limitless* event. The enthusiasm demonstrated for the event highlighted the community spirit and support amongst all in attendance on the day, but also indicated support for the non-gendered, performance-based categorisation of competitors in the event, as demonstrated in the previous theme.

In addition to their support of the *Limitless* event, all participants were also highly accepting of gender and/or sex diverse athletes and inclusive sporting policies and events more broadly, demonstrating unequivocal support for gender and/or sex diverse athletes to be included in sport and physical activity. For example, Laura (*spectator, cisgender woman*) affirmed that ‘there shouldn’t be any exclusion’ and Karen (*competitor, cisgender woman*) also expressed her views on inclusion: ‘any kind of mixing- just makes the world a better place’. Similarly, Clara demonstrated her view that no one should be excluded from sport because of who they are:

‘It’s always been the definition of “you are this you are that you have to fit into that little box”. There are more and more people who are becoming much more self-aware or actually you know I don’t fit that f**king box, but why should they be excluded from doing something they love, whatever sport it may be. I don’t think anybody should be forced to say well I can’t do it because I can’t go to that because it’s not fair. We can have something where anyone can compete, it just makes it fairer for everyone and everyone competes in the same way.’ *Clara, spectator, cisgender woman.*

Susan, a spectator, acknowledged though that whilst she was also accepting and supportive of gender and/or sex diverse athletes, the issue of their inclusion in sport was not something that they had ever given much thought to before being involved in *Limitless*:

‘Until you put the event together it wasn’t actually something that really crossed my mind... it did make me think a bit more like how obviously it would make people feel if they’re not comfortable in that specific box.... it’s not fair on other people that they’ve got to feel like they’ve got to fit into that box... without doubt I believe things should be based on ability... if that individual wants to take part

against any other individual then they should be allowed, it's the individual taking part making the decision, not the rest of us. It keeps everybody included, that to me is the most important thing not just in sport but in life in general. People shouldn't feel they can't do something because of who they are.' *Susan, spectator, cisgender woman.*

Tom (*competitor, cisgender man*) expressed a similar unfamiliarity with the topic prior to his involvement in *Limitless*: 'I'm just a white average male that was raised by mum and dad and I've not really had the exposure to any of these issues that people may have, you know.' The points raised here by Clara, Susan and Tom could be argued as indicating a blind acceptance of less sex-segregated sport and the inclusion of gender and/or sex diverse athletes in sport – they feel strongly that they support inclusion, but admit not having much prior knowledge about the complexities of doing so.

The support for the inclusion of gender and/or sex diverse athletes in sport was unanimous amongst all the competitors and spectators that we interviewed. The more difficult question for these participants was not the question of whether these athletes should be included, but rather the one of how this inclusion should take place, as we explore further in the *fear for diminishing women's achievements* and *overwhelming challenge* themes in the remainder of this section.

Fear for diminishing women's achievements.

Fear for women's achievements was highlighted by many of the participants we interviewed as an important consideration for performance-related categorisation in sport. As previously discussed, all the participants demonstrated unequivocal support for the inclusion of gender and/or sex diverse athletes, and support for less sex-segregation in sport. This though did not mean that they did not foresee potential challenges in doing so. In particular, some participants highlighted potential difficulties for women's sport and the achievements of female athletes in the removal of sex-segregation in sport.

For spectator Laura, her fears for women's sport were grounded in the basis of biological differences between men and women, and thus the potential disadvantage cisgender women might face if they are competing against a transgender woman:

‘Obviously, a man is always going to be stronger than a lady that’s just how they are... I don’t know, it’s difficult because they obviously want to live their life like a lady... and it’s like their sport and they want to compete but by the same token it’s slightly unfair.... Because on like the one hand if that’s how you know they feel that they want to live as a woman they should be able to do that and do everything else but then is it fair against other ladies?’ *Laura, spectator, cisgender woman.*

Laura’s use of the terms ‘lady’ and ‘ladies’ here is interesting given the drive in recent years to shift to the term ‘women’ rather than ‘ladies’ in sporting contexts due to the latter’s connotations of physical fragility and reinforcement of sexist stereotypes (Tomas, 2021). Laura’s assumption that ‘a man is always going to be stronger’ also reinforces these stereotypes. These fears for women in sport were also present for Laura when considering the notion of categorisation by ability as opposed to sex and/or gender in other sports such as athletics for example:

‘My only thought would be that you know in some way it might make maybe ladies feel a bit less at the top of their sport, you know when you’re in a group with a man who can run 100 metres 2 seconds faster than you and you’re never going to beat him because of genetics and whatever, does it pose that problem, it might demean you know a lady’s training or effort.’ *Laura, spectator, cisgender woman.*

In discussions around inclusion, testosterone - a regulated substance (World Anti-Doping Agency, 2018) - is often placed as the most important factor when considering the biological differences that Laura was referring to. Alex – a non-binary person assigned female at birth and taking prescribed testosterone – discussed this and their worries about therefore having an advantage against the cisgender women they were competing against in Level 1 of *Limitless*:

‘I kind of, I do worry that I had an advantage because of my category obviously as I said I just wandered in and won, and I do worry that that was because I was the only one there who was demonstratively on testosterone. I don’t like taking an

illegal drug, so I felt a bit like a drug cheat... I don't know how true that is, there are some studies that sort of like testosterone isn't the most important thing etc. but then I know for myself that I have improved in strength through no real work on my own, through taking testosterone, so I am a bit conflicted with that one I think.' *Alex, competitor, non-binary.*

For Jess, a competitor, the concerns around women's sport were more focused on how comfortable women may be in training and competing alongside men, and the preservation of single sex/single gender sporting spaces, than the biological differences and perceived advantages or disadvantages:

'I know like a lot of the women I work out with that are kind of like as strong as me but yeah they would never go and lift with the lads, or whatever, but I don't care I lift with anyone. But I think that's the only other thing so it might put, I don't know what guys think but for a female for sure it might put some females off certain sports. Because I think more yeah, I think more females like to just train and play with other females and I think that would possibly be one kind of drawback for sure.' *Jess, competitor, cisgender woman.*

Tom, a competitor, though, described how he was prompted to think about his previous perception that men would always have an advantage over women after his closely fought battle for second place in Level 2 of *Limitless* with a cisgender female competitor:

'I thought to myself you know we are like neck and neck after the first event and wow you know I've really got to push myself and I felt like I really had to go for it to be able to just keep in front of her... just to be able to push me she's really trained hard, then it just makes me think you've really trained hard for this as well as I have and it's like we deserve to be able to compete on the same field definitely.' *Tom, competitor, cisgender man.*

In this discussion, Tom suggested that this close competition with a cisgender woman had encouraged him to further consider his thoughts on how sport should or shouldn't be categorised. On one hand, the close battle described here between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman in the inaugural *Limitless*, and the placing of a cisgender woman above

cisgender men in Level 2 of the second *Limitless* that was held in 2019, are both examples that challenge Laura's earlier assumption that all men will be stronger than all women and instead support the argument that biological differences between male and female bodies do not have to mean that the male body will always be stronger than the female body. However, on the other hand, considering the sex and/or gender make-up of the 33 competitors across the three performance categories in the second 2019 competition, cisgender women made up the majority of Level 1 and cisgender men made up the entirety of Level 3, with the most gender and/or sex diversity occurring in the middle category, Level 2. This is not to suggest though that there are not cisgender women in existence who are capable of entering Level 3, as can be proved by looking at the weights lifted by cisgender women in other sex-segregated strongwoman competitions, particularly at national and international level (e.g., Lockridge, 2020).

In the introduction to this chapter, we proposed that, for applicable sports, this performance-based categorisation does not undermine the principles of fair and equitable participation for women, since participants are grouped according to ability. Secondly, we proposed that by removing sex-segregation, it equalises the disparity (in importance, attention, funding etc) observed between male and female sports. For those interview participants who placed focus on the biological differences between male and female bodies, there still appeared to be some concern for women's achievements in the sense that even if all competitors are grouped by ability, these matters of biology could mean that it is only 'male-bodied' athletes who are able to compete in the highest ability categories. Taking that perspective, this would be attributed to their biological make-up, meaning that they would be the ones who can run fastest, be strongest, or be able to throw the furthest, for example.

Overall, participants' overwhelming support for the inclusion of gender and/or sex diverse athletes, combined with the fears of some for women's achievements, meant that many therefore felt it was an overwhelming challenge to consider how these two positions could be reconciled and appropriate methods of inclusion adopted in sport going forward, as we will discuss in the next, final theme of this section.

Overwhelming challenge

Despite their unequivocal acceptance of gender and/or sex diverse athletes, many of the participants identified potential challenges to less sex-segregation in sport, including but not limited to their fear for women's achievements. Their lack of awareness of how these challenges could be overcome presented the issue as an overwhelming challenge. For example, Laura (*spectator, cisgender woman*) voiced her lack of ideas as to how the challenge should be overcome: 'I don't know, it is difficult... it's a difficult one that... I think you could be debating it for many hours' and Karen (*competitor, cisgender woman*) also expressed the perceived difficulty of it for her: 'I don't think there is really any reason not to, I just think that it'll be quite challenging to do it, you know it's not going to be easy'. Susan, a spectator, also expressed the view that less sex-segregation in sport would be more difficult at higher performance levels of sport than at grassroots and community level sporting opportunities such as *Limitless* due to the increased difficulties in regulating competitors by ability level:

'The trouble is the regulation at this level, at that level of that competition I think would have self-regulated because people would be going what were you doing in this competition or why are you in this group you should have been in that group... I think there'd be a certain amount of self-regulation and encouraging people to be in the right groups and so on, I think a little bit further up that's where the regulation would, will be more difficult definitely.' *Susan, spectator, cisgender woman.*

When considering the biological differences that were raised by some participants in their fear for women's achievements, Susan displayed optimism at the possibility of this being able to be managed, but again admitted not knowing what that would look like or how it would occur:

'I don't really know that much about testosterone. Obviously, I know like males have it more than females, but as to the advantage it gives you over sport, surely there's going to be ways, there must be a way of managing that. I don't know how that would be but there must be a way of managing that.' *Susan, spectator, cisgender woman.*

Similarly, Hari, a competitor, worked through their own thoughts aloud but also came to the conclusion that they didn't know what the best way would be to move forward in terms of inclusion and policies within sex-segregated sport:

'That's quite difficult. There are probably quite a few options there so there's, if people are transitioning in a binary manner I feel they should be allowed to join whichever team they want to, but then I guess there'd be problems if they were a trans woman maybe who hadn't yet changed over. Or you could have a third box to put them in but then again that wouldn't work either because I can't imagine there'd be many, no actually no that's bulls**t. I don't really know to be honest.'

Hari, competitor, genderfluid.

The uncertainty and lack of solutions that are presented here by Susan, Hari and other participants are reflective of the complexity of both including gender and/or sex diverse athletes in sex-segregated sport, and introducing sporting events and opportunities that use performance-based categorisation or are otherwise not sex-segregated. There are a number of other factors that might also need to be taken into consideration when looking to adopt a performance-related categorisation, for example in heavy contact and combat-based sports. One participant that we interviewed suggested that the safety risks often perceived in these types of sports could be negated in a performance-related categorisation in the same way that they currently are in a sex-segregated categorisation – by continuing to also use a second categorisation based on athlete bodyweight (i.e., athletes would be categorised twice, on performance-related aspects and on bodyweight). It could also be argued that this is most feasible in larger sporting events where there are a high number of competitors. In smaller sporting events, the division of an already small number of athletes into even smaller sub-categories may pose different challenges. Some support for sex-integration in martial arts and combat sports (MACs) has been previously acknowledged by Channon (2014) who stated that the presence of men and women in the same training spaces in MACs in Western societies is already not uncommon, although the focus in this study was training spaces as opposed to competitive ventures.

For both the competitors and spectators we interviewed then, the prevailing thoughts were that gender and sex diverse people should be included in sport, it would be a positive shift to see less sex-segregation in sport, and the ability-based model of categorisation worked well in

the context of *Limitless*. However, those interviewed perceived there to be many potential barriers to a shift towards less sex-segregated sport, and the question of how this shift is achieved is one steeped in overwhelming challenge.

Concluding thoughts

In this chapter, we described *Limitless*, a sporting event that has embraced the idea of performance-related categorisation of athletes, and was developed to promote participation of all genders, with no sex-segregation. We provided an account of the structure of the competition and how it came to be, before exploring the findings of a qualitative investigation into the attitudes and opinions of those who either competed in or were spectators at the inaugural event in 2018. We argue that the *Limitless* strength competition, which uses a performance-related categorisation system as opposed to one of sex and/or gender, provides an inclusive and supportive sporting opportunity for individuals of all gender identities. Both competitors and spectators from the inaugural *Limitless* competition demonstrated a high level of support for the event and its performance-related method of categorisation. Whether or not the ability-based model adopted in this case proves to be transferable beyond this setting, *Limitless* provides a space for marginalised athletes and individuals who may have limited opportunities to compete in other settings.

The aim of running the *Limitless* competition to this point has been to challenge the binary sex and/or gender-based model that most sport still uses to organise its competitions, and to experiment with other possible ways to categorise sport that could be adopted in more situations in the future. Another point of consideration for performance-related sport categorisation that we are able to reflect on using the example of *Limitless* is matters pertaining to the advertisement of events, how wording affects perception of such events and thus participant uptake to them. We noted previously that the second *Limitless* competition attracted much larger numbers, but that to our knowledge, the first author of this chapter was the only non-cisgender competitor in this second event in 2019. The smaller representation of gender diversity in *Limitless 2.0* is likely to be a reflection of our changed approach to advertising and marketing the competition. Our message always aimed to be that *Limitless* was a competition open to anyone, but in our advertisement of the first *Limitless* we placed heavy emphasis on its inclusion of gender diverse competitors. For example, phrases in the description of the event such as ‘this transgender and non-binary inclusive competition...’.

Subsequent feedback from some members of the gym the competition was held at suggested that this put off several cisgender people from entering the competition as they did not want to take up spaces to compete that others may have needed more than them.

Taking on board the feedback from the first competition and aiming to increase the number of entrants, in the advertisement of *Limitless 2.0* we changed our approach in the hope of making it clearer that the competition was open to anyone, regardless of gender and/or sex. We did so by using less-specific messages about the suitability of the competition to gender diverse people and using more general phrases about it being open to anyone. However, we were also careful to maintain and make clear its description as 'all-gender inclusive'. It was noted earlier in this chapter that strength athletics has the potential to be an intimidating sport from the exterior, and so it is important that in our framing of the competition as open to anyone we do not lose the message that gender and sex diverse competitors will be welcome and that our aim is to provide an inclusive sporting space. Whether this broader advertising inadvertently served to exclude potential transgender competitors, who may have preferred an LGBT+ only event, is unknown. However, the large number of cisgender competitors suggests that the concept of non-sex segregated sport is appealing to all people, irrespective of gender identity, highlighting the fact that re-framing sports is not driven by a solely transgender-inclusive agenda, as some critics would suggest. The make-up of *Limitless*' competitors in terms of gender representation, and the impact of the framing and advertisement of it on this, is something that we are continually reviewing, but we will always make it a priority for *Limitless* to provide a space for people who have limited other opportunities to compete. Therefore, no gender or sex diverse entrant would ever be declined the opportunity to compete, regardless of the numbers of competitors already registered.

The competitors and spectators interviewed after the inaugural *Limitless* did express support for less sex-segregation in sport more broadly, however they identified several potential challenges in implementing this and a sense of overwhelming challenge when considering how this could be achieved. Reflecting on these, we argue that the removal of sex-segregated categories in *Limitless* provides an opportunity for participation for individuals of all gender identities, without the need for regulations to dictate under what circumstances (i.e., medical interventions) participation is permitted. We also argue that for applicable sports, when necessary considerations have been made, performance-related categorisation does not undermine the principles of fair and equitable participation for women, as participants are

grouped according to their ability. Lastly, we argue that by removing sex-segregation, there is potential to equalise the playing field of male and female sports and increase participation.

References

Anderson, E. (2008). 'I used to think women were weak': Orthodox masculinity, gender segregation and sport. *Sociological Forum*, 23(2), 257-280.

Arcelus, J., Bouman, W.P., Van Den Noortgate, W., Claes, L., Witcomb, G., & Fernandez-Aranda, F. (2015). Systematic review and meta-analysis of prevalence studies in transsexualism. *European Psychiatry*, 30(6), 807-815.

Boykoff, J., & Yasuoka, M. (2015). Gender and politics at the 2012 Olympics: media coverage and its implications. *Sport in Society*, 18(2), 219-233.

Channon, A. (2014). Towards the “undoing” of gender in mixed-sex martial arts and combat sports. *Societies*, 4, 587-605. doi: 10.3390/soc4040587

Elling-Machartzki, A. (2017). Extraordinary body-self narratives: Sport and physical activity in the lives of transgender people. *Leisure Studies*, 36(2), 256-268.

England and Wales Cricket Board (2020). *England and Wales Cricket Board policy on transgender people playing cricket*. Retrieved from:

<https://resources.ecb.co.uk/ecb/document/2020/03/16/dbf9fbc2-d56d-429a-b48d-562064b1ecc8/2020-ECB-Policy-on-Trans-People-Playing-Cricket.pdf>

Federation of Gay Games (2020). *Promoting equality through sport and culture*. Retrieved from: <https://gaygames.org/Mission-&-Vision>

Fielding, J., & Bass, C. (2018). Individuals seeking gender reassignment: marked increase in demand for services. *British Journal of Psychiatry bulletin*, 42(5), 206-210.

Government Equalities Office. Department for Education. (2018). Reform of the Gender Recognition Act. Retrieved from: <https://consult.education.gov.uk/government-equalities-office/reform-of-the-gender-recognition-act/>

Handelsman, D.J. (2017). Sex differences in athletic performance emerge coinciding with the onset of male puberty. *Clinical Endocrinology*, 87(1), 68–72.

Hargreaves, J. (1994). *Sporting females: Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sport*. London: Routledge.

Harper, J. (2017). Athletic Gender, *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 80, 139-153.

International Olympic Committee (2020). *Paralympic Games*. Retrieved from: <https://olympics.com/ioc/ipc>

Johnson, K. C., LeBlanc, A.J., Deardorff, J., & Bockting, W.O. (2020). Invalidation experiences among non-binary adolescents. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 57(2), 222-233.

Jones, B.A., Arcelus, J., Bouman, W.P., & Haycraft, E. (2017). Barriers and facilitators of physical activity and sport participation among young transgender adults who are medically transitioning. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 18(2), 227-238. doi: 10.1080/15532739.2017.1293581

Jordan-Young, R.M., & Karkazis, K. (2019). *Testosterone: An Unauthorized Biography*. Harvard University Press.

Kerr, R., & Obel, C. (2017). Reassembling sex: reconsidering sex segregation policies in sport. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 10(2). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2017.1406976>

Knott-Fayle, G., Peel, E. & Witcomb, G. (under submission). (Anti-)feminism and cisgenderism in sports media. *Feminist Media Studies*.

Lockridge, R. (2020, November 13). 2020 America's Strongest Man and Woman results and highlights. *Barbend*. Retrieved from: <https://barbend.com/2020-americas-strongest-man-and-woman-results/>

Milner, A.N., & Braddock, J.H. (2016). *Sex segregation in sports: Why separate is not equal*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Newman, H.J.H. (2020). *Becoming a Strongwoman: an auto/ethnographic study of the pursuit of strength and power, and the negotiation of gender aesthetics in the UK strongwoman community* (PhD Thesis). Retrieved from: https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/thesis/Becoming_a_strongwoman_an_auto_ethnographic_study_of_the_pursuit_of_strength_and_power_and_the_negotiation_of_gender_aesthetics_in_the_UK_strongwoman_community/12706238

Peel, E., & Newman, H.J.H. (2020). Gender's wider stakes: Lay attitudes to legal gender reform. *Feminists@Law*, 10(2).

Pike, J. (2020). Safety, fairness, and inclusion: transgender athletes and the essence of Rugby. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 1-14.

Schultz, J. (2018). *Women's Sports: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press.

Shin, P.S. (2017). Sex and Gender Segregation in Competitive Sport: Internal and External Normative Perspectives. *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 80, 47-61.

Tomas, F. (2021, February 2). Why I loathe the word 'ladies' in women's sport. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/2021/02/02/loathe-word-ladies-womens-sport/>

World Anti-Doping Agency. *Monitoring program 2018*. Retrieved from: <https://www.wada-ama.org/en/resources/science-medicine/monitoring-program>

WBA (2019). *Rules of World Boxing Association*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.wbaboxing.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/World-Boxing-Association-Rules.pdf>