

Q&A: Do protective policies in elite sports safeguard athletes?

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With the 2024 Summer Olympics around the corner, all eyes are on Paris. Over 10 thousand of the best athletes from around the world will gather to compete in 32 sports, push the boundaries of athletic

achievement and break records along the way.

But behind the athletes, their tremendous skill and accomplishments are protective policies designed to protect athlete health, well-being and the spirit of fair play. Think age-eligibility restrictions, anti-doping policies and Paralympic classification, which determines which athletes with disabilities can compete against each other.

In her new book, "Regulating Bodies: Elite Sport Policies and Their Unintended Consequences," Jaime Schultz, professor of kinesiology at Penn State, examined the global history of protective policies in elite sports and their influence on international discourses around race, sex, identity and impairment. She outlined how protective policies in sports meant to safeguard athletes can lead to unhealthy and, at times, unethical practices in the pursuit of record-breaking performances.

Penn State News spoke with Schultz about her book, elite sports policies and their toll on athletes and sports.

What inspired you to write this book?

I love sports. It's just outstanding and amazing what these athletes can do. But sometimes, it's almost like a factory to produce these terrific athletes. I started to think about how they are protected in sports, how they're not protected in sports, and the toll that sports must take on their bodies, their minds and their spirits. The main question of the book was: What are we willing to accept in the pursuit of sporting excellence?

What's the role of elite sports policies?

When we think about elite sports policies, we think about how they protect athletes and protect the spirit of fair play. But they are also put in

place to protect the image of sports.

For example, in the ancient Olympics, combat sports were called the heavy events. Since there were no weight classes, the heavier athletes would dominate. Weight limits and categories were developed in the 18th century in British horse racing.

Over time, other sports adopted weight classes because it made space for lighter-weight athletes, ultimately allowing more people to compete. It was good for the image of the sport and created this semblance of fair play. But it was also good for gambling because it made competition more "even" and people could bet on that.

There's nuance involved. Yes, sports and athletes deserve protection, but I want people to think through these policies, their intentions, their implementation and their unintended consequences. Who are sports for? Who's protected? What are the unintended consequences of these policies? Does it lead to deceptive acts or unhealthy practices? Does it exacerbate inequality?

How have protective policies changed as science and technology have advanced, raising more ethical questions about what's fair in sports?

When elite sports policies were first put into place, we didn't really know how to enforce them. We didn't really have any scientific criteria to base them on. As sports has become more "scientized," especially in the last 20 years, we have added more scientific rationales behind the policies—scientific measurements like [testosterone levels](#), studies on the degree of activity limitation for Para athletes.

On the one hand, these are seemingly quantifiable and objective

measures, but they are also constructs that reflect the social, cultural and political context of the time and the people who create the policies.

What have been some of the unintended consequences of these policies?

With protective policies, the humanity of the athlete can get lost and that's where we start to see unintended consequences.

There are different versions of the narrative but initially policies that regulate athletes based on sex were put in place because of concerns about intersex athletes and later trans athletes competing in women's sports. There was a desire to protect women athletes from competitors who might have some kind of unfair advantage.

They were also put in place to protect the image of women's sports at a time when women's sports weren't seen as a legitimate enterprise. But an unintended consequence of those policies is that it drums out people with any kind of sexual difference, leaving gender diverse athletes vulnerable and with no place to compete.

With weight classes, there's this idea that it's advantageous to compete at the lowest possible weight, leaving athletes vulnerable to dangerous weight cutting tactics. On the one hand, you may say athletes should be able to do what they want with their bodies but are we creating sports that inevitably lead to these unhealthy practices that athletes need protection from?

Elite sports policies don't just affect elite athletes. In what ways do those policies trickle down to lower levels of competition?

When you don't know what to do with your own policies, it's easy to look to the elite level and see what they're doing. Trans athlete policies are an example. Rather than putting out its own policies, the NCAA has deferred to the national governing bodies of sports like U.S. Swimming or U.S. Track and Field and their policies on trans inclusion in sports. We've seen youth sports leagues look to those same policies too. But those policies are designed for elite level athletes. They're not appropriate for people at lower levels or youth sports.

How can we ensure that policies intended to be protective actually are?

What I've learned from studying sports for so long is that we can't really ensure anything—that's part of their beauty and the frustration. I think when it comes to protective policies, however, it's important to design them around what's best for the athletes. Too often, the unintended consequences of these policies are tied to sports organizations trying to protect their own images and interests. Sports should always be—first and foremost—about the athletes who make them possible.

With the Paris Olympics starting soon, what are you most excited to watch?

I'm excited for all of it. There are incredible individual athletes who I can't wait to see perform, especially Simone Biles and Sha'Carri Richardson. In terms of specific sports, I'm really intrigued to see what Olympic breaking (break dancing) will look like.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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