When people in South Africa say “Limpopo,” they mean the middle of nowhere. They are referring to the northernmost province of the country, along the border with Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, where few people have cars or running water or opportunities for greatness. The members of the Moletjie Athletics Club, who live throughout the area in villages of small brick houses and mud-and-dung huts, have high hopes nonetheless.

One day in late September, twenty teen-age athletes gathered for practice on a dirt road in front of Rametlwana Lower Primary School, after walking half an hour through yellow cornfields from their homes, to meet their coach, Jeremiah Mokaba. The school’s track is not graded, and donkeys and goats kept walking across it to graze on the new grass that was sprouting as the South African winter gave way to spring. “During the rainy season, we can’t train,” said Mokaba, a short man wearing a brown corduroy jacket with a golden Zion Christian Church pin on the lapel. “We have nowhere to go inside.”

For cross-country, Mokaba and his co-coach, Phineas Sako, train their runners in the miles of bush that spread out behind the track, toward the mountains in the distance. The land is webbed with brambles, and the thorns are a serious
problem for the athletes, who train barefoot. “They run on loose stones, scraping them, making a wound, making a scar,” Sako, a tall, bald man with rheumy eyes and a big gap between his two front teeth, said. “We can’t stop and say we don’t have running shoes, because we don’t have money. The parents don’t have money. So what must we do? We just go on.”

The athletes and their coaches apologized for not having a clubhouse in which to serve tea. They didn’t like talking out in the wind and the dust. There was music playing down the road at a brick-front bar, and chickens squawking in people’s front yards, where they are kept in enclosures made out of tree branches. “The most disadvantaged rural area,” Sako said, laughing a little and stretching his arms out wide. “That is where you are.”

The fastest runner in the club now is a seventeen-year-old named Andrew who recently became the district champion in the fifteen-hundred-metre event. The average monthly income for black Africans in Limpopo—more than ninety-seven per cent of the local population—is less than a thousand rand per month, roughly a hundred and thirty-five dollars. (For white residents, who make up two per cent of the population, it is more than four times that amount.) “I think I will go to the Olympics,” Andrew said, with conviction.

Joyce, a tiny girl in a pink sweater who is eighteen but looked much younger, was similarly optimistic. “I want to be the world champion,” she said, her voice so soft it was almost a whisper. “I will be the world champion. I want to participate in athletics and have a scholarship. Caster is making me proud. She won. She put our club on the map.”

Caster Semenya, the current world champion in the eight hundred metres, was a member of the Moletjie Athletics Club until a year ago. She was born in Ga-Masehlong, a village about fifteen miles from the track, and she was, Coach Sako said, “a natural.” Even before Semenya left Limpopo for college, in Pretoria, she had won a gold medal in her event at the 2008 Commonwealth Youth Games, in Pune, India, with a time of 2:04, eleven seconds behind the senior world record set by the Czech runner Jarmila Kratochvílová in 1983. “I used to tell Caster that she must try her level best,” Sako said. “By performing the best, maybe good guys with big stomachs full of money will see her and then help her with schooling and the likes. That is the motivation.” He added, “And she always tried her level best.” Semenya won another gold medal in July, in Mauritius, at the African Junior Athletics Championships, lowering her time by a remarkable seven and a half seconds, to come in at 1:56.72. This beat the South African record for that event, held by Zola Budd, and qualified Semenya for her first senior competition, the 2009 World Championships, in Berlin.

Semenya won the eight-hundred-metre title by nearly two and a half seconds, finishing in 1:55.45. After the first lap of the race, she cruised past her competitors like a machine. She has a powerful stride and remarkable efficiency of movement: in footage of the World Championships, you can see the other runners thrashing behind her, but her trunk stays still, even as she is pumping her muscle-bound arms up and down. Her win looks effortless, inevitable. “Even when we were training, I used to pair her with the males,” Sako told me. “I feel like she was too powerful for ladies.” It was a stunning victory for Semenya, for the Moletjie Athletics Club, and for South Africa.

After the race, Semenya told reporters, “Oh, man, I don’t know what to say. It’s pretty good to win a gold medal and bring it home.” (Her voice is surprising. As Semenya’s father, Jacob, has put it, “If you speak to her on the telephone, you might mistake her for a man.”) She continued, “I didn’t know I could win that race, but for the first time in my life the experience, the World Championships . . .” She broke into a grin. “I couldn’t believe it, man.”

Since the day Semenya broke Zola Budd’s record, people in South Africa had been talking about her. Semenya does not look like most female athletes. People questioned whether she was really a woman. Some even e-mailed the International Association of Athletics Federations, the worldwide governing body for track and field, with their doubts.

Before Semenya was awarded her gold medal in Berlin, on August 20th, a reporter asked about a story that had been circulating at the Championships, that Semenya’s sex was unclear and that she had been required to undergo gender-verification testing before the race. The I.A.A.F. confirmed the rumor, arguably in violation of its confidentiality policies. (“The choice is that you lie, which we don’t like to do,” Nick Davies, the communications director, told the New York Times.) The story ripped around the world. Several of Semenya’s competitors in the race were incensed that she had been allowed to participate. “These kind of people should not run with us,” Elisa Cusma, of Italy, who came in sixth, said. “For me, she is not a woman. She is a man.”

“Just look at her,” Mariya Savinova, of Russia, who finished fifth, said.

Semenya is breathtakingly butch. Her torso is like the chest plate on a suit of armor. She has a strong jawline, and a
build that slides straight from her ribs to her hips. “What I knew is that wherever we go, whenever she made her first appearance, people were somehow gossiping, saying, ‘No, no, she is not a girl,’” Phineas Sako said, rubbing the gray stubble on his chin. “‘It looks like a boy’—that’s the right words—they used to say, ‘It looks like a boy.’ Some even asked me as a coach, and I would confirm: it’s a girl. At times, she’d get upset. But, eventually, she was just used to such things.” Semenya became accustomed to visiting the bathroom with a member of a competing team so that they could look at her private parts and then get on with the race. “They are doubting me,” she would explain to her coaches, as she headed off the field toward the lavatory.

South Africa has eleven official languages. The majority of people in Limpopo speak the Pedi language, and many also speak English and Afrikaans, which schoolchildren were required to learn under apartheid. Sako’s English was fluent but rough, and he frequently referred to Semenya as “he.” “Caster was very free when he is in the male company,” Sako said. “I remember one day I asked her, ‘Why are you always in the company of men?’ He said, ‘No, man, I don’t have something to say to girls, they talks nonsense. They are always out of order.’ ”

On September 11th, Australia’s Daily Telegraph, a tabloid owned by Rupert Murdoch, reported that Semenya’s test results had been leaked, and that they showed that Semenya, though she was brought up as a girl and had external female genitalia, did not have ovaries or a uterus. Semenya was born with undescended testes, the report said, which provided her with three times the amount of testosterone present in an average female—and so a potential advantage over competitors.

“I know what Caster has got,” her aunt Johanna Lamola told the Times. “I’ve changed her nappies.” Semenya’s father said, “I don’t even know how they do this gender testing. I don’t know what a chromosome is. This is all very painful for us—we live by simple rules.” Semenya did not cheat. She has not been evasive. It is very common for élite female athletes, who exert themselves to their physical limits as a matter of course, not to menstruate. There’s no reason that Semenya or her coaches would have been alarmed if she were amenorrhoeic. “Maybe it’s because we come from a disadvantaged area,” Jeremiah Mokaba said. “They couldn’t believe in us.”

The I.A.A.F. has yet to inform Semenya whether she can continue running in international female competitions. I asked Sako what he thought would happen. “Caster,” he said firmly, “will remain Caster.”

Sports have played an important role in modern South African history. A crucial part of the African National Congress’s strategy to end apartheid during “the struggle,” as everyone calls it, was to secure international condemnation of South Africa’s government through boycotts and the banning of South African athletes from all international competitions. Conversely, during the 1995 rugby World Cup Nelson Mandela managed to unite the entire country behind the Springboks, the South African team, which had been a hated symbol of Afrikaner white supremacism. It was pivotal to his success in avoiding civil war and in establishing a new sense of national solidarity. Sports are “more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers,” Mandela said. “Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire, the power to unite people that little else has.” Sometimes it can unite people against other people. The South African Minister of Sport and Recreation, Makheneki Stofile, has warned, “If the I.A.A.F. expels or excludes Semenya from competition or withdraws the medal, I think it would be the Third World War.”

In August, when Semenya returned from Germany, thousands of cheering supporters waited to welcome her at O. R. Tambo Airport, outside Johannesburg. President Jacob Zuma met with her to offer his congratulations, as did Nelson Mandela.

Phat Joe, one of the most famous radio d.j.s in the country, was fired by Kaya FM for suggesting on his show that Semenya might have testicles. Lolly Jackson, the owner of a chain of strip clubs called Teazers, put up an enormous billboard in a suburb of Johannesburg picturing a naked woman lying flat on her back above the words “No Need for Gender Testing!” Jackson subsequently claimed that the billboard had nothing to do with Semenya, but he sent her lawyers, at the firm of Dewey & LeBoeuf, a check for twenty thousand rand.

“I think it is the responsibility of South Africa to rally behind this child and tell the rest of the world she remains the hero she is and no one will take that away from her,” Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, an ex-wife of Mandela’s and a recently elected Member of Parliament, was quoted as saying in the London Telegraph. “There is nothing wrong with being a hermaphrodite. It is God’s creation. She is God’s child.” By contrast, the African National Congress Youth League, a division of the African National Congress, issued a statement saying that it “will never accept the categorization
of Caster Semenya as a hermaphrodite, because in South Africa and the entire world of sanity, such does not exist.”

The African National Congress is part of the Tripartite Alliance, with the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions. This year’s meeting of the Congress happened to coincide with Heritage Day, and many of the hundreds of delegates who assembled at a conference center outside Johannesburg were in traditional tribal dress. Winnie Madikizela-Mandela wore a Xhosa turban and cape. A representative from the police and prison workers’ union, wearing nothing but a loincloth made from springbok pelts and a Swazi necklace of red pompoms, mingled with fellow union members at the back of an enormous auditorium, where delegates were debating the items of the day: whether to support the legalization of prostitution in time for the soccer World Cup, which South Africa will host in 2010, and whether to pass a resolution in support of Caster Semenya.

The sessions are meant to evoke the African tradition of villagers gathering to share opinions on local matters. Everyone gets to speak, though men speak much more than women. The prostitution question was examined from every angle: some were concerned about “the downgrading of our women by capitalism”; others felt that every source of income was desperately needed and that sex workers, like everybody else, deserved the protection of a union. After several hours, the delegates decided that what was needed was more discussion.

The South African Minister of Women, Children, and Persons with Disabilities, Noluthando Mayende-Sibiya, went to the lectern dressed in red Xhosa regalia to speak about “the issue of our young star, Caster Semenya.” Everyone applauded. “She is our own,” Mayende-Sibiya said. “She comes from the working class.” The crowd blew horns in support, and some people ululated. “You cannot be silent! The human rights of Caster have been violated,” she concluded. The resolution passed with unusual alacrity.

South Africans have been appalled by the idea of a person who thinks she is one thing suddenly being told that she is something else. The classification and reclassification of human beings has a haunted history in this country. Starting with the Population Registration Act of 1950, teams of white people were engaged as census-takers. They usually had no training, but they had the power to decide a person’s race, and race determined where and with whom you could live, whether you could get a decent education, whether you had political representation, whether you were even free to walk in certain areas at certain hours. The categories were fickle. In 1985, according to the census, more than a thousand people somehow changed race: nineteen whites turned Colored (as South Africans call people of mixed heritage); seven hundred and two Coloreds turned white, fifty Indians turned Colored, eleven Colored turned Chinese, and so on. (No blacks turned white, or vice versa.)

Taxonomy is an acutely sensitive subject, and its history is probably one of the reasons that South Africans—particularly black South Africans—have rallied behind their runner with such fervor. The government has decreed that Semenya can continue running with women in her own country, regardless of what the I.A.A.F. decides.

South Africans have compared the worldwide fascination with Semenya’s gender to the dubious fame of another South African woman whose body captivated Europeans: Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus. Baartman, an orphan born on the rural Eastern Cape, was the servant of Dutch farmers near Cape Town. In 1810, they sent her to Europe to be exhibited in front of painters, naturalists, and oglers, who were fascinated by her unusually large buttocks and had heard rumors of her long labia. She supposedly became a prostitute and an alcoholic, and she died in France in her mid-twenties. Until 1974, her skeleton and preserved genitals were displayed at the Musée de l’Homme, in Paris. Many South Africans feel that white foreigners are yet again scrutinizing a black female body as though it did not contain a human being.

Mayende-Sibiya has asked that the United Nations get involved in Semenya’s case, and I asked her what she thought it could do. “I would like to see it getting more information from the I.A.A.F.,” she said over lunch at the Congress. “We wrote to the I.A.A.F. to ask a number of questions, including what precedents informed the action that it took on Caster. Why pick up on her? What were the reasons? The I.A.A.F. has not responded, and that to me raises questions on how it conducts business.” Mayende-Sibiya is a big, warm woman, a grandmother and a former nurse, who hugs everyone she meets. She sighed. “There is a lot that has gone wrong in this process.”
confirm this. Its president, Lamine Diack, was scheduled to visit South Africa several weeks ago to talk to Semenya and to representatives of the government, but he cancelled his trip at the last minute. In late October, I got in touch with the I.A.A.F., with questions about Semenya, and received a form-letter reply (dated September 11th) that it would not comment on the case until after its council meeting, at the end of November. Then, a few hours later, Nick Davies, the director of communications, wrote back by e-mail:

Two things triggered the investigation. Firstly, the incredible improvement in this athlete’s performance . . . and more bluntly, the fact that SOUTH AFRICAN sport Web sites were alleging that she was a hermaphrodite athlete. One such blog (from sport24.co.za) stated, “Caster Semenya is an interesting revelation because the 18 year old was born a hermaphrodite and, through a series of tests, has been classified as female.” With this blatant allegation, and bearing in mind the almost supernatural improvement, the I.A.A.F. believed that it was sensible to make sure, with help of A.S.A., that the athlete was negative in terms of doping test results, and also that there was no gender ambiguity which may have allowed her to have the benefits of male hormone levels, whilst competing against other women.

A.S.A. is the abbreviation for Athletics South Africa, the national governing body in charge of track and field. The group’s president, Leonard Chuene, who was also on the board of the I.A.A.F., and had been in Berlin for the Championships, told reporters when he returned, “We are not going to allow Europeans to define and describe our children.” South Africa would have no part in tests conducted by “some stupid university somewhere,” Chuene, who also happens to be from Limpopo, said. “The only scientists I believe in are the parents of this child.” He claimed to be shocked by the way that the I.A.A.F. had treated Semenya, and he resigned from the board in protest before he left Berlin. (A week later, Chuene wrote the I.A.A.F. a letter saying that his resignation had been hasty, and asked to be reinstated.)

In fact, Chuene was not only aware of the Berlin tests; he had authorized them, and, at the urging of the I.A.A.F., he had also had Semenya tested before she left Pretoria. On August 3rd, the I.A.A.F.’s anti-doping administrator, Dr. Gabriel Dollé, had sent an e-mail to Harold Adams, A.S.A.’s team doctor, citing the Web-site posting that Nick Davies mentioned to me, which alleged that Semenya is a “hermaphrodite . . . classified as female.” Dollé asked Adams if sex verification had been conducted—or ought to be. (Debora Patta, the host of a South African investigative program called “3rd Degree,” obtained the e-mail exchange and forwarded it to me.) Adams then sent the following e-mail to Leonard Chuene and A.S.A.’s general manager, Molatelo Malehopo:

After thinking about the current confidential matter I would suggest we make the following decisions.
1. We get a gynae opinion and take it to Berlin.
2. We do nothing and I will handle these issues if they come up in Berlin. Please think and get back to me A.S.A.P.

Malehopo replied the same day, agreeing to the exam. Semenya was taken to the Medforum Medi-Clinic, in Pretoria, for tests by a gynecologist.

“They did not even consult us as parents,” Semenya’s mother, Dorcus, told the Star, a South African daily. “They acted like thieves. They did whatever they wanted to do with our child without informing us.”

On August 8th, Adams and Semenya flew to Germany to join the rest of the South African team and the A.S.A. staff at the training camp. Adams, who is also one of President Zuma’s personal physicians, told Chuene that the Pretoria test results were “not good.” He recommended that they withdraw Semenya from the competition, rather than subject her to further testing.

“The reason for my advice was that the tests might prove too traumatic for Ms. Semenya to handle, especially without the necessary support of family and friends around her,” Harold Adams wrote in a subsequent report to Parliament. “The other reason was that being tested at the World Championships would not give her enough time to consult extensively and perhaps arrive at a decision to refuse the testing.”

Leonard Chuene did not take Adams’s advice. Instead, Semenya ran in a qualifying heat on August 16th and then in the semifinals, the next day. After her success in the semifinals, a television reporter outside the stadium blurted out, “With that comes rumors. I heard one that you were born a man?” The video is very hard to watch. As the reporter speaks, Semenya’s breathing quickens, and she appears to be on the verge of panic. Then she looks at the ground and says, “I have no idea about that thing. . . . I don’t give a damn about it,” and walks away from the cameras. August 18th
was supposed to be a rest day before the finals. Semenya spent it undergoing a second round of tests. The next day, after
two weeks of confusion and scrutiny, Semenya won the gold medal.

In September, the Johannesburg weekly Mail & Guardian exposed Chuene’s dishonesty about authorizing the tests in
Pretoria and Berlin. Chuene contends that he was simply following I.A.A.F. procedure, and that his deceit was a well-
tentioned attempt to maintain confidentiality. After the story broke, he held a press conference to apologize for lying to
the nation, but the apology was not unconditional. “Tell me someone,” he said, “who has not lied to protect a child.”

Semenya is back at the University of Pretoria now, training with her coach, Michael Seme. I asked Seme how he
thought she was doing. “Sometimes you can look at somebody thinking he is O.K.,” Seme said. “But you find out in his
heart, maybe it is complaining. I can’t see what’s happening in her heart.”

A t a meeting of the British Gynaecological Society on April 25, 1888, Dr. Fancourt Barnes declared that he had “in
the next room a living specimen of a hermaphrodite.” The person was nineteen years old, and had always believed
that she was female. Barnes thought otherwise. He cited “1) the appearance of the head, 2) the timbre of the voice, 3) the
non-development of the breasts,” and “the utter absence of anything like a uterus or ovaries,” as evidence of the subject’s
insufficient femininity.

Other members of the society who examined the patient disagreed. Dr. James Aveling asserted that “the face was
feminine, the throat was decidedly that of a woman.” Dr. Charles Henry Felix Routh argued that Barnes’s diagnosis was
“guess work,” and claimed that “the mere fact” that this patient might not have a uterus was “no argument against its
being a woman.” (Routh was not entirely convinced that the patient lacked a uterus and suggested that unless Barnes tried
to “pass his entire hand into her rectum” they could not be sure.) Dr. Heywood Smith finally “suggested that the Society
should divide on the question of sex,” and so it did. Before the doctors sent their patient home with her mother, they took
a photograph. In the foreground, a “medical man” holds the “living specimen”’s genitals with his thumb and forefinger
for the camera, between her spread legs. In the background is the blurred image of the subject’s head, not quite obscured
by the blanket that covers her torso. The subject’s face is grainy, but it is set in an unmistakable expression of powerless
panic.

The society’s inability to reach consensus was due, in part, to its failure to locate either testicles or ovaries in the
patient. Until 1915, that was the generally accepted determining factor for sex. In “Hermaphrodites and the Medical
Invention of Sex,” Alice Domurat Dreger calls the period from 1870 to 1915 “the Age of Gonads.”

The way doctors, scientists, and sports officials have determined sex has changed radically over the years. Before
1968, the International Olympic Committee verified the sex of female athletes by looking between their legs. Athletes
complained about these humiliating inspections—which weren’t always conclusive—and, for the 1968 Olympics, in
Mexico City, the I.O.C. decided to implement chromosomal testing. (There were rumors that some men from Eastern Bloc
nations had plans to masquerade as women.) These assessments proved problematic, too.

In normal human development, when a zygote has XY, or male, chromosomes, the SRY—sex-determining region Y
—gene on the Y chromosome “instructs” the zygote’s gonads to develop as testes, rather than as ovaries. The testes
then produce testosterone, which issues a second set of developmental instructions: for a scrotal sac to develop and for
the testes to descend into it, for a penis to grow, and so on. But the process can get derailed. A person can be born with
one ovary and one testicle. The SRY gene can end up on an X chromosome. A person with a penis who thinks he is
male can one day find out that he has a uterus and ovaries. “Then, there is chromosomal variability that is invisible,”
Anne Fausto-Sterling, the author of “Sexing the Body,” told me. “You could go your whole life and never know.”

All sorts of things can happen, and do. An embryo that is chromosomally male but suffers from an enzyme deficiency
that partially prevents it from “reading” testosterone can develop into a baby who appears female. Then, at puberty, the
person’s testes will produce a rush of hormones and this time the body won’t need the enzyme (called 5-alpha-reductase)
to successfully read the testosterone. The little girl will start to become hairier and more muscular. Her voice may deepen,
and her testes may descend into what she thought were her labia. Her clitoris will grow into something like a penis. Is she
still a girl? Was she ever?

If a chromosomally male embryo has androgen-insensitivity syndrome, or A.I.S., the cells’ receptors for testosterone,
an androgen, are deaf to the testosterone’s instructions, and will thus develop the default external sexual characteristics of
a female. An individual with androgen-insensitivity syndrome has XY chromosomes, a vagina, and undescended testes, but her body develops without the ability to respond to the testosterone it produces. In fact, people with complete A.I.S. are less able to process testosterone than average women. Consequently, they tend to have exceptionally “smooth-skinned bodies with rounded hips and breasts and long limbs,” Dreger writes in “Hermaphrodites.”

People with incomplete A.I.S., on the other hand, could end up looking and sounding like Caster Semenya. Their bodies hear some of the instructions that the testosterone inside them is issuing. But that does not necessarily mean that they would have an athletic advantage.

For example, the Spanish hurdler Maria Patiño, who had A.I.S., went to the World University Games in Kobe, Japan, in 1985, and forgot to bring a letter from her doctor verifying that she was female. Until 1999, gender verification was compulsory for all female athletes. Officials scraped some cells from the inside of her cheek for chromatin testing. If visual inspection had still been the standard, Patiño’s gender never would have been questioned. Her genitals, and the rest of her, looked female, but according to the test she was male. The story got out, and she was stripped of her past titles. Her boyfriend left her. Her scholarship was revoked, and she was evicted from the national athletic residence.

In 1991, the International Association of Athletics Federations abandoned this method as unreliable, and, nine years later, so did the International Olympic Committee. Patiño was requalified in 1988, when she was able to prove that her body could not make use of its testosterone, and that she had developed as a woman. “I knew I was a woman,” Patiño said, “in the eyes of medicine, God, and most of all in my own eyes.”

The approach that the I.A.A.F. appears to be taking in its review of Semenya’s test results from Berlin is not unlike the British Gynaecological Society’s muddled attempt to determine the sex of its living specimen. The I.A.A.F.’s gender policy states that an athlete “can be asked to attend a medical evaluation before a panel comprising gynecologist, endocrinologist, psychologist, internal medicine specialist, expert on gender/transgender issues.” It has not come up with a single litmus test for sex; its goal, like that of the I.O.C. in such situations, is to reach consensus. The federation does not define the criteria that its group of experts must use to reach their determination, however. “It seems to be working with a kind of ‘I know it when I see it’ policy,” Dreger, a professor of clinical medical humanities and bioethics at Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine, told me. The policy does not indicate who should be tested and on what grounds. An athlete will be examined if “there is any ‘suspicion’ or if there is a ‘challenge’ ” to her sex. Evidently, a blog post qualifies as a challenge.

In conjunction with other sports bodies, the I.A.A.F. will hold a special conference, in January, 2010, to review the policy. On November 18th, it sent out a press release stating that there would be “no discussion of Caster Semenya’s case” at the November council meeting, despite its earlier promise to resolve the issue there.

Unfortunately for I.A.A.F. officials, they are faced with a question that no one has ever been able to answer: what is the ultimate difference between a man and a woman? “This is not a solvable problem,” Alice Dreger said. “People always press me: ‘Isn’t there one marker we can use?’ No. We couldn’t then and we can’t now, and science is making it more difficult and not less, because it ends up showing us how much blending there is and how many nuances, and it becomes impossible to point to one thing, or even a set of things, and say that’s what it means to be male.”

In 2000, Anne Fausto-Sterling, a professor of biology at Brown University, conducted what remains the study of record on the frequency of intersexuality, and concluded that 1.7 per cent of the population develops in a way that deviates from the standard definition of male or female. (Some scholars have argued that Fausto-Sterling’s categories are too broad, because they include individuals who show no noticeable expression of their chromosomal irregularity.) Based on this figure, intersexuality is much more common than Down syndrome or albinism, though it can be harder to keep track of: every baby born in the United States is registered as “male” or “female.”

The word “hermaphrodite” is as outdated and offensive to the people it once described as the word “mulatto.” In one Greek myth, Hermes, the son of Zeus, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, have a child endowed with all the attributes of both of them. “Hermaphrodite” implies a double-sexed creature, fully male and fully female, which is a physical impossibility for human beings. (You can be half and half, but you can’t be all and all.)

In the nineteen-nineties, a movement spearheaded by an activist who used to call herself Cheryl Chase, and now goes by the name Bo Laurent, insisted that what was needed was a new identity. Chase founded the Intersex Society of North
America (now defunct) to draw attention to the frequently tragic consequences of doctors’ performing irreversible surgery on newborns to enforce a sex—one that the baby might just as easily as not grow up to reject. The society advocated assigning intersex children a gender at birth but leaving their bodies intact, so that upon adulthood they could make their own choices about whether they wished to undergo surgical modification.

Then something unexpected happened. “The intersex identity started getting inhabited by people who weren’t really intersex,” Dreger said. “The people who accumulated around the intersex identity tended to be queer and out and comfortable with this identity outside the gender binary.” They felt that refraining from interfering with infants’ ambiguous genitalia was the first step on a desirable path to dissolving gender altogether. To them, this idea was “as politically inspiring as it is utterly disconnected from the actual experience of intersex people or the heart-wrenching decisions their parents have to make when an intersex child is born,” as Vernon A. Rosario, a professor of psychiatry at U.C.L.A., put it in a recent issue of *The Gay and Lesbian Review*.

Semenya, whether she wants to be or not, has become a hero to many people who “don’t fit the sex and gender boxes,” as Jarvis, from Winnipeg, posted on the Web site casterrunsforme.com. A person named Megan Ewart wrote, “I’ll bet you’ve got a lot more transgendered allies than just me that are feeling your pain.”

Now there is an even newer term of art for people born with ambiguously sexed bodies who do not wish to be connected with the “L.G.B.T.Q.I.”—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex—camp: “disorders of sex development,” or D.S.D. By naming the condition a medical “disorder,” advocates of the D.S.D. label hope to make the people it describes seem less aberrant. “Oddly enough, it does normalize it in a certain way,” Fausto-Sterling said. “It’s putting it on the same plane as other anomalous development—like congenital anomalies of the heart.” Advocates of the D.S.D. label are not seeking to create a third sex. Rather, they want disorders of sex development to be treated like any other physical abnormality: something for doctors to monitor but not to operate on, unless the patient is in physical discomfort or danger.

In science and medicine, categories are imperative, but they are also inflected by social concerns. “Mammals,” for example, were so named by Linnaeus, in the eighteenth century, because their females produce milk to suckle their young. Was it irrelevant that scientists like Linnaeus sought to encourage mothers to breast-feed their own children, and to do away with the “unnatural” custom of wet-nursing? “There are philosophers of science who argue that when scientists make categories in the natural world—shapes, species—they are simply making a list of things that exist: natural kinds,” Fausto-Sterling said. “It’s scientist as discoverer. The phrase that people use is ‘cutting nature at its joint.’ There are other people, myself included, who think that, almost always, what we’re doing in biology is creating categories that work pretty well for certain things that we want to do with them. But there is no joint.”

If sex is not precisely definable, how else might sports be organized? Theoretically, athletes could be categorized by size, as they are in wrestling and boxing. But then women would usually lose to men. Or athletes could be categorized by skill level. Almost always, this would mean that the strongest élite female athletes would compete against the weakest élite male athletes, which would be pretty demoralizing all the way around.

Another option would be to divide athletes biochemically. Testosterone is, for an athlete, truly important stuff. Developmentally, testosterone spurs linear bone growth in adolescents. Fully grown people use testosterone in doping because it helps create muscle mass and increases red-blood-cell production, which, in turn, increases cellular oxygen-carrying capacity. The more oxygen an athlete has in her cells, the more efficiently her muscles operate and the longer it takes for her body to start producing lactic acid, the substance that causes cramps and pain. Testosterone makes a faster, better athlete, and enables a body to recover more quickly from exhaustion. Hypothetically, according to Eric Vilain, a professor of human genetics and pediatrics at U.C.L.A., those with a certain level of functional testosterone (testosterone that the body can actually make use of) could be in one group, and those below it could be in another. Although the first group would be almost all male and the second group would be almost all female, the division would be determined not by gender but by actual physical advantages that gender supposedly, yet unreliably, supplies.

But, setting aside the issue of gender, there is still no such thing as a level playing field in sports. Different bodies have physical attributes, even abnormalities, that may provide a distinct advantage in one sport or another. The N.B.A., for instance, has had several players with acromegaly—the overproduction of growth hormone. Michael Phelps, who has...
won fourteen Olympic gold medals, has unusually long arms and is said to have double-jointed elbows, knees, and ankles. Is Caster Semenya’s alleged extra testosterone really so different?

There is much more at stake in organizing sports by gender than just making things fair. If we were to admit that at some level we don’t know the difference between men and women, we might start to wonder about the way we’ve organized our entire world. Who gets to use what bathroom? Who is allowed to get married? (Currently, the United States government recognizes the marriage of a woman to a female-to-male transsexual who has had a double mastectomy and takes testosterone tablets but still has a vagina, but not to a woman who hasn’t done those things.) We depend on gender to make sense of sexuality, society, and ourselves. We do not wish to see it dissolve.

What the I.A.A.F. concludes about Caster Semenya could have ramifications for sports in general and for South Africa in particular. This is true not only because it is Semenya’s place of origin. South Africa has an unusually high level of intersex births. Nobody knows why.

During apartheid, for every white town there was a black township. Only the white towns appeared on maps, though the townships were nearly always more populous. John Carlin, in his account of the 1995 rugby World Cup, “Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation,” describes townships as “the black shadows of the towns.” Khayelitsha is the black shadow of Cape Town. According to the most recent census, half a million people live there, but in reality the number is probably much higher. Many of their parents and grandparents settled in the Cape Flats, outside of Cape Town, after the Group Areas Acts of the nineteen-fifties made it illegal for them to live in the city. “Khayelitsha” is Xhosa for “New Home.” Shacks made of corrugated tin, cardboard, and scrap wood, many without electricity or running water, sprawl for miles along mostly unmarked dirt roads, punctuated by beauty parlors and fruit stands in structures no bigger than British telephone booths.

By Khayelitsha standards, Funeka Soldaat’s small home, with its solid brick walls and tiled floor, is very fine. Soldaat is an L.G.B.Q.T.I. activist. Both she and a cousin—whom Soldaat, following local custom, referred to as her sister—were born with anomalous genitalia, and both underwent “corrective” partial clitoridectomies when they were young, which they now regret. This is the standard “treatment” for babies born with a clitoris longer than one centimetre but smaller than 2.5 centimetres, at which point it becomes a medically acceptable penis. The scar tissue that forms after such a procedure can impede sensation for the rest of a person’s life.

“My sister, she look just like Caster,” Soldaat said, smiling. “She don’t have the breasts. She never get a period. Everybody thinks she’s a guy, just like Caster. We call them, in Xhosa, italasi. It is not a new thing—everybody has a word for it.” That there is a name for intersex does not mean it is a condition that is ever spoken about. “One thing that is so difficult for African people: there’s no way that you can discuss about something that’s happened below the belt,” Soldaat said. “All the time you don’t know what’s happening in your body, and there’s nobody that try to explain to you. Then it becomes a problem. If my mom would know that I’m intersex and there’s nothing wrong about it, then there was nothing going to make me panic.”

Particularly in remote areas, where babies tend to be born in the presence of a mother, a grandmother, and maybe a midwife, it is easy to keep a baby’s genitalia a secret. People want to insulate their children from the shame of being different, so they simply pretend that they are not. “Limpopo and Eastern Cape are the high incidence of intersex people,” Soldaat said. “And when you grow up in the rural areas it’s a mess, because people don’t even go to doctors.” The determination of gender is made very simply. “It depends what they do when they go to the loo,” Soldaat said. “That’s what makes their children to be women. If they go to the loo and they sit, that’s it.”

On her coffee table, Soldaat had a photocopy of the South African magazine You, which featured a photo spread showing Caster Semenya dressed in high heels and a short skirt, her hair fluffed out and her face made up. Her expression was painfully uncomfortable, and the pictures were garish.

“My sister was crying when she saw this whole thing on paper,” Soldaat said, flipping through the pages. “It’s a disaster. She look like a drag queen! I can just imagine her at night when she’s alone, looking at these pictures.”

Soldaat tossed the papers on the floor. “When we are really, really poor sometimes, and we really, really want to protect ourselves, people take an advantage,” she said. “That’s why it was easy for people to force her to do this, for A.S.A. to do this.” Athletics South Africa received a payment from You in exchange for Semenya’s appearance in its

pages. “To say that she enjoyed doing this, that’s a lie! There is no way. There is no way!”

Soldaat has a shaved head and was wearing big jeans and a baseball cap with the words “Mama Cash,” the name of a Dutch women’s-rights organization, on it. She is a lesbian, and she said that she suspected Semenya is, too.

“Everyone! Everyone who is like this likes women,” Soldaat said, laughing. “Everyone!” (“Caster has never cared about men other than as friends,” her father told a reporter. “Her sisters were always after boys in the way that I, too, was always after girls when I was younger. But Caster has never been interested in any of that.”) If Soldaat is right, then Semenya’s life may well get more difficult. Soldaat was going to court later that day to listen to the proceedings against several men accused of raping and murdering a lesbian in Khayelitsha. “They are raping lesbians to correct them,” she said. “In order they can be a proper woman.”

Soldaat said that Semenya should run with women. “It will never be like intersex women have their own Olympic Games—that’s ridiculous!” she said. Soldaat has a big, raucous laugh, and the idea of that imaginary competition absolutely killed her. Soldaat was a runner herself when she was young. “If she can’t run in the Olympics, Caster has to continue running with other girls in South Africa. Because, really, that’s what she wants, that’s what she is, that’s what keeps her alive: that’s running.”

The only thing more slippery than the science in the Semenya case is the agendas of the men who have involved themselves in it. There is a bounty of political gain for whoever spins the story most successfully.

Julius Malema, the president of the A.N.C. Youth League, has said that he does not believe in the existence of intersex people, and has tried to frame the concept as a suspect and unwelcome import from abroad. “Hermaphrodite, what is that?” Malema asked at a press conference in October. “Somebody tell me, what is ‘hermaphrodite’ in Pedi? There’s no such thing. So don’t impose your hermaphrodite concepts on us.” (The word is tarasi, according to a professor of South African languages at Yale.) The Youth League issued a press release decrying a “racist attack on Semenya” orchestrated by the media in “Australia, which is the most lucrative destination for South Africa’s racists and fascists who refuse to live under a black democratic government.”

Julius Malema is not known for being levelheaded. He won the presidency of the Youth League in a highly contested election in 2008. Just a few months later, while Jacob Zuma was fending off charges of racketeering and fraud (the charges have since been dropped), Malema became notorious for vowing, “We are prepared to die for Zuma. Not only that, we are prepared to take up arms and kill for Zuma.” (Zuma also beat a rape charge, in 2006.) Zuma has called Malema “a leader in the making,” worthy of “inheriting the A.N.C.” one day. Malema has demonstrated an ability to mobilize people and an almost reckless willingness to use charges of racism to do so. He has been Leonard Chuene’s most steadfast defender.

Chuene has, since the revelation of his deceit, become almost as controversial a figure in South Africa as Caster Semenya. Countless editorials have accused Chuene of sacrificing her in his quest for a gold medal and have demanded his ouster. In Dr. Harold Adams’s report to Parliament, he calls Chuene’s decision “short-sighted and grossly irresponsible.” Though Chuene received a vote of confidence from Athletics South Africa’s board after his admission, the A.N.C. asked him to apologize; its rival party, the Democratic Alliance, demanded his resignation, and the Deputy Minister of Sport called him a liar. Minister Mayende-Sibiya told me that Chuene’s behavior was “totally unacceptable.”

Julius Malema has continued to paint any criticism of Chuene as racist. In early October, one of A.S.A.’s biggest sponsors, Nedbank, announced that it would withdraw its support pending a change in A.S.A.’s leadership. Malema retaliated by calling for a boycott of the bank. “We will teach them a lesson about the power of the masses,” Malema said. “They may have money, but we can defeat them because we have the masses.”

On three occasions, Leonard Chuene’s personal assistant made an appointment for me to interview “the president,” as she calls her boss. She always called or e-mailed at the last minute to cancel. We had several calls scheduled, but Chuene never picked up his phone at the appointed time. Then, one day, I got on an airplane going to Polokwane, a small northern city. Sitting in an empty row, in a navy blazer and pressed jeans, was Leonard Chuene.

Chuene wanted to know how I recognized him. Only minutes before, I had been looking at his photograph in a newspaper, alongside a story about Nedbank’s withdrawal of funds from A.S.A. and A.S.A.’s failing finances. “I have become more famous than Caster,” he said, and chuckled. Chuene has a shiny bald head and a little gut. He was once a
serious runner and has completed more than a hundred marathons, he told me. He said he had no choice but to get Semenya tested. “You cannot just argue like a fool and say no. This is not the law of the jungle!” He speaks very quickly. He explained why he had not heeded Adams’s advice to withdraw Semenya from the race.

“I don’t have the results in my hand!” he said. “How did you expect me to take an informed decision?”

Indeed, Adams had had word from the Pretoria clinic but no actual documentation of the test results. “Where is the evidence?” Chuene said. “Now I come back home and they will say, ‘When this black child from the rural be No. 1, why do you deprive her?’ ”

Chuene shrugged. “They say I lied. That’s what they are saying. I said no. There is confidentiality! I.A.A.F. is in trouble for breaching that. Who was going to be Leonard to say that?” The engines started roaring as the small plane took off. “It was 22-Catch situation!” Chuene shouted over the noise. “If I will do this, it’s ‘Why did you withdraw her?’ If I did not, ‘Why did you allow her to run?’ Whatever way you look at it, I’m judged. I’m judged!”

There were around twenty people on the plane. We were airborne, and the engines quieted. Chuene did not. “The stupid leader is the one who says, ‘I’m not sure; I don’t know.’ I had to take a decision! She must run. If Chuene didn’t allow her, it meant she was going to stay in South Africa. This thing has given her more opportunity! Everybody knows her. The world is out there to say, ‘Your problems are our problems.’ Imagine if I had not let her win!” As we touched down in Polokwane, he said, “If there is to be help, it is because of the opportunity created by Leonard Chuene.”

Recently, Semenya told the Guardian, “It’s not so easy. The university is O.K. but there is not many other places I can go. People want to stare at me now. They want to touch me. I’m supposed to be famous.” She added, “I don’t think I like it so much.”

The law firm Dewey & LeBoeuf announced in September that it was taking on Caster Semenya as a client. It is still sorting through what happened and deciding whom to sue. One afternoon, I drove with Benedict Phiri, an associate in the firm’s Johannesburg office, across the Blood River from Polokwane to Ga-Masehlong to meet Semenya’s mother. Ga-Masehlong is a small village dotted with jacaranda trees; goats graze on the garbage and the grass on the roadsides. The houses have tin roofs, and people put rocks on top of them to keep them from blowing away. There are satellite dishes in several yards, but most people have dug their own wells and collect firewood from the bush for cooking.

Everyone knows everyone else in Ga-Masehlong, and it was easy to get directions to the house of the champion.

At the Semenya home, there was a flyer tacked to the front door promoting a lecture that Julius Malema was giving at the local elementary school. Phiri knocked. We heard shuffling and then the sound of locks turning and bolts sliding. Phiri called out that he was Caster’s lawyer, but nobody came to the door. A few minutes later, a pretty girl wearing an orange fleece jacket walked into the yard and introduced herself as Maphela. She said she was fourteen. “Do you want my story?” she asked in English. “I am Caster’s sister! But I am different from Caster.” I asked her what she meant, and Maphela replied emphatically, “I am not that way.”

Maphela looked toward the window where her mother, Dorcus, was hiding her face behind the curtain and motioning vigorously for her daughter to stop speaking with us. We asked Maphela if she would tell her mother that Phiri was Caster’s lawyer. Maphela ran off toward the back door.

We sat on the stoop of a cooking hut in the Semenyas’ front yard, and waited with the chickens and the goats. An elderly neighbor named Ike came into the yard. “Caster has done a wonderful thing,” he said. “This has brought to mind when the Philistines were persecuting the Israelites.” Ike told us that he just wanted to check on the family and see how their visit from Julius Malema the previous evening had gone. This made Phiri nervous.

After a few minutes, Maphela returned. She told us that her mother would not meet with Phiri, because she did not agree that Caster should have a lawyer.

As we drove away through the bush, Phiri called his boss in Johannesburg, a white former rugby player named Greg Nott. I could hear Nott yelling through the phone. “We knew this would happen all along,” Phiri said, trying to calm him. “Julius Malema is Chuene’s ally, and Julius is giving Caster money.”

On the occasion of the A.N.C. Youth League’s sixty-fifth anniversary, in October, Julius Malema presented Caster Semenya with a hundred and twenty thousand rand (about sixteen thousand dollars) at a gala dinner in Johannesburg. “I can even see it,” Phiri said on the phone. “They probably told the mom, ‘People will come and say they’re her lawyer.”
Don’t believe it.” Phiri was afraid that Malema would step in and persuade the family to side with Chuene, who comes from the same region, and whose interests might not be served by lawyers poking around. One of the first things that Dewey & LeBoeuf did when the firm took the case was to ask both A.S.A. and the I.A.A.F. to provide documentation of the tests and any other pertinent paperwork; neither organization has fully complied.

The firm is representing Semenya pro bono, so good publicity will be its only reward. “And that,” Phiri said, “could blow up in our faces.”

Nobody wants Chuene out of office more than an old friend and colleague named Wilfred Daniels, who started at A.S.A. with him, sixteen years ago. “From day one we connected, in the struggle days, you know?” Daniels said. “We were like, we belong together.” Both Daniels, fifty-eight, and Chuene, fifty-seven, grew up as promising athletes who could never compete internationally because of apartheid. They understood each other then, but not anymore.

Daniels—whom everyone calls Wilfie—is the unofficial mayor of Stellenbosch, a leafy college town in the wine country. He likes to hold court at the Jan Cats restaurant, in front of the elegant Stellenbosch Hotel. As he sat at his street-front table on a sunny afternoon in a green Izod jacket and track pants, drinking a bottle of Chenin blanc, every other person who passed by stopped to pay his respects, or at least waved at him driving by. Daniels was a famous athlete in his youth, and he is even more famous now. In early September, he resigned from A.S.A. in protest over its handling of Caster Semenya, and had since been in the papers constantly. “We allowed it,” he said. “If we as management were on our game, we would’ve objected. We accompanied her to the slaughter. And that is my dilemma.”

Daniels was not directly involved in the testing or the coverup. During the first training session in Berlin, “while she was warming up and stretching, putting on her spikes, she told me they had done tests on her. I said, ‘What tests?’ ” Semenya told him that she didn’t know what they were for, but she described what had happened. “They put her feet in straps and ‘they work down there,’ she said. They told her it was dope tests.” Semenya had undergone routine doping tests many times before. She knew that this was something very different.

“If you and me who come from the big cities, if we find it repulsive, I mean, what about a rural girl,” Daniels said. “She doesn’t know what’s happening around her. She’s seven, eight months in the city now, in Pretoria, a new life altogether, and nobody takes the time to explain to her?” He shook his head in disgust. “It was unprovoked talk, and she’s not somebody who talks, normally. And she spoke to me as a Colored guy, as a man, about intimate, female things. That to me was like a cry for help.”

The sins of A.S.A., as Daniels sees it, are, first, not giving Semenya adequate information about the Pretoria tests—including her right to refuse them—and, second, not pulling her out of the competition in Berlin.

“It’s the day before the championships,” Daniels said. “Eighteen years old, your first World Championships, the greatest race of your life. You can’t focus, because you have to go for gender testing. And you come back and you have to watch on TV: they are explaining the possibilities. I found her in her room, sitting in front of the TV like this,” Daniels put his hand up to his face to show how close she was to the screen. “And they’re talking about her and she’s trying to understand what they’re saying. Because nobody has spoken to her, to tell her, Look, this is what these tests might mean. I felt so ashamed.”

Daniels has worked in various capacities at A.S.A. over the years, first in management, then as a coach, and, most recently, as A.S.A.’s coordinator with the High Performance Centre, the program at the University of Pretoria where Semenya is now. Daniels does not agree with the I.A.A.F.’s assessment that Semenya’s seven-and-a-half-second improvement was “supernatural.” She went from training on the dirt roads of Limpopo to a world-class facility. She is also an extraordinarily hard worker. “Understand: Maria Mutola is her hero,” Daniels said. “So she had wonderful goals and ideals for herself; she was really trying to emulate her hero one day.” Maria Mutola is a runner from Mozambique whose event, like Semenya’s, was the eight hundred metres. Mutola also happened to have a strikingly masculine appearance.

Daniels believes that the best that can happen for Semenya at this point is to have a career like his. He has travelled the world and met many of his heroes. He has a cellar with more than two thousand bottles of red wine. He eats his grilled springbok at Jan Cats and clearly enjoys being a local eminence. But it is probably not the life he would have led if apartheid hadn’t prevented him from competing internationally; and it is not the life that was in front of Caster.
Semenya before she went to Germany. “I understand that her running days are over,” Daniels said.

There’s another scenario, in which Semenya’s story could become one of against-all-odds victory. The I.A.A.F. could apologize and decree Semenya female. Kobus van der Walt, the director of sport at the High Performance Centre, pointed out that though Semenya has beaten the South African record for her event, she hasn’t come anywhere near Kratochvílová’s world record, which means that there are plenty of women with a chance of besting Semenya. Conceivably, one day we will see Caster Semenya at the Olympics with a medal hanging from her neck. She could be the poster child for triumphant transgression.

But that is not what Daniels thinks will happen. “Now her life is over,” he said. “Not only as an athlete but as a human being. Even if the I.A.A.F. says there’s nothing wrong with her, people will always look at her twice. There should be hell to pay for those responsible.” He pounded his fist on the table. “I’ve got a daughter. If that was my daughter, what would I have done as a father? Somebody might have been dead by now.”

On November 5th, Chuene and the entire board of A.S.A. were suspended by the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee, pending an investigation into how they handled Caster Semenya.

One afternoon at the High Performance Centre, I sat up in the bleachers, killing time before a meeting with Kobus Van der Walt. I was surrounded by a spread of neatly partitioned fields, like a Brueghel painting: there are twenty-four cricket nets, six rugby fields, twenty-two outdoor tennis courts, nine soccer fields, seven squash courts, and a track surrounded by a three-thousand-seat stadium, all kept in impeccable condition. Runners in little packs zoomed around the fields and into the distance. Spring sunlight flicked along the blue of the swimming pool.

A figure in a black sweatshirt with the hood up walked along the path about thirty yards in front of me. There was something about this person’s build and movements that drew my attention. I got up and followed along the path, until I caught up to the person where he or she was stopped behind the cafeteria, talking to a waiter and a cook, both of whom were much shorter than she was. It was Caster Semenya.

She wore sandals and track pants and kept her hood up. When she shook my hand, I noticed that she had long nails. She didn’t look like an eighteen-year-old girl, or an eighteen-year-old boy. She looked like something else, something magnificent.

I told her I had come from New York City to write about her, and she asked me why.

“Because you’re the champion,” I said.

She snorted and said, “You make me laugh.”

I asked her if she would talk to me, not about the tests or Chuene but about her evolution as an athlete, her progression from Limpopo to the world stage. She shook her head vigorously. “No,” she said. “I can’t talk to you. I can’t talk to anyone. I can’t say to anyone how I feel or what’s in my mind.”

I said I thought that must suck.

“No,” she said, very firmly. Her voice was strong and low. “That doesn’t suck. It sucks when I was running and they were writing those things. That sucked. That is when it sucks. Now I just have to walk away. That’s all I can do.” She smiled a small, bemused smile. “Walk away from all of this, maybe forever. Now I just walk away.” Then she took a few steps backward, turned around, and did.

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL DALDER/REUTERS

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