

Interview with former Spanish athlete and academic María José Martínez Patiño, by Nicholas Bergh from the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten

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Foto: Private

- I have a bomb, said the team doctor.

The entire Spanish women's team pricked up their ears.

- "Pati" is a guy!

Fear and shame washed over Maria José Martínez Patiño.

The next day, the Spanish hurdler sat in the stands in Japan and pondered. She watched her teammates compete while a question raged in her mind: 'How is my body different from theirs?' Right then and there, her life's struggle began. A battle that has now flared up again.

After a pause of more than three decades, mandatory sex tests are back in Athletics. Every single female participant in the 2025 World Championships has been tested—even Amalie Luel, who gave birth to a child two years ago.

The rules remind Patiño of the moment in the room in Japan, back in 1985. However, soon an even greater humiliation was to come.

'As you can imagine, all the media in the world have tried to reach me in recent weeks,' says Patiño in a video call with Aftenposten.

She is indeed open about something that is a taboo [*note from dsdfamilies: 'a private matter'*] for many.

During her upbringing in Galicia, a region in northern Spain known for its windy and rainy conditions, she wore only girls' clothes.

– Did you feel different?

– No. Never.

At a religious school, she found her passion: Running. Little Maria was not the best of all. But she loved to train. She became better and better.

In 1983, she qualified for the World Championships at the age of 22. Like everyone else, she had to undergo a sex test. The result was as follows: 'This test satisfies the IAAF's requirements for competition in women's events,' it stated.

She obtained the 'woman's certificate', which she thought was obvious. So much so that she forgot to bring it to the World University Games in Kobe two years later. There and then, she had to take a new test – with a shocking result: Patiño did not have two X chromosomes (which women usually have).

That was the reason she was denied the chance to compete in Japan. In the mid-80s, such a finding was a huge taboo. The doctor's advice was clear: 'Pretend you have an injury and go home quietly'.

Miss/Mrs ..... PATINO .....  
Mlle/Mme

CERTIFICATE No. 5341

First name(s)/Prénom(s) Maria José Martínez

of/de ..... Spain ..... (Country/Pays)

born/née ..... (date)

On the occasion of the  
A l'occasion des  
World Championships  
(Games or Championships/Jeux ou Championnats)

held at/tenus à Helsinki on/le 1983

the above mentioned athlete underwent an approved medical test, the result of which was sex-chromatin positive. This satisfies the I.A.A.F. requirements for competition in Women's athletic events.

L'athlète mentionnée ci-dessus a subi un examen médical approuvé, et la chromatine sexuelle s'est révélée positive. Ceci répond aux règlements de la F.I.A.A. pour concourir aux épreuves féminines.

I hereby confirm that this Certificate is issued in accordance with the report of the official Medical Panel of the within-mentioned Games/Championships.

Je confirme par la présente que ce certificat est délivré conformément au rapport du Comité médical officiel des Jeux/Championnats mentionnés ci-contre.

*M. Patiño*  
Athlete's signature/Signature de l'athlète

*J. Holt*  
General Secretary, I.A.A.F.  
Secrétaire/Général, F.I.A.A.

*Image: The 'woman certificate' awarded to Maria José Martínez Patiño.*

Two months of fear and uncertainty awaited.

Then the result of the karyotype test finally came: she had XY chromosomes. What men usually have.

But Patiño was born with complete androgen insensitivity syndrome (CAIS). This means her body does not respond to testosterone and therefore never developed into a male body. Thus, Patiño did not—and had never had—a genetic advantage over her female competitors.

She went to the national championship the following year, full of hope. But the message from the Spanish Athletics Federation was clear: Act as if you are injured. Then you can retire quietly.

Patiño flatly refused. She lined up for the 60-meter hurdles – and won.

But in the Spanish newspapers the next day, she found no accolades. Instead, the headlines focused on Spain's top hurdler having 'male' chromosomes. Someone had leaked her private health information.



*Maria José Martínez Patiño (on the left) was classified as a woman during the 1983 World Championships (photo). Then came the counter-notice that started a lifelong battle. Photo: Private*

It was a brutal blow. Patiño was crushed.

– 'It was the toughest period of my life'.

She could no longer live in the same place as the athletes. She lost her sports scholarship. Her running times were erased. The hurdler had been part of the community. Now she was an outcast.

And she could no longer compete.

– 'I didn't understand the motive. When I look in the mirror, I look like your sister, wife, or daughter.'

That's why she kept fighting. Several international experts supported the Spaniard: she had no unfair advantage.

Then, in 1988, the counterstatement came. "In light of new evidence, we consider her eligible to compete," stated the letter from the International Association of Athletics Federations.

– 'That letter compensated for so much suffering,' reminisces Patiño.

The Spaniard's tireless efforts also contributed to the federation's abolition of mandatory sex tests in 1992.

But now, 33 years later, they are back.

– I believe World Athletics is making a mistake. In this matter, they are not on the right side of history, says Patiño.

The organization has not responded to Aftenposten's email regarding this article. One of the questions we posed was whether they had learned from the practices of the 80s and 90s.

According to current regulations, there is indeed an exception that allows athletes with CAIS to participate. Thus, athletes like Patiño can compete.

However, the testing regime remains subject to criticism. In practice, athletes are tested for the SRY gene. The gene is found on the Y chromosome. World Athletics, therefore, calls it a "reliable indicator for determining biological sex."

However, Professor Andrew Sinclair disagrees. He was the one who discovered the SRY gene in the 1990s.

– The test has significant limitations because it assumes that chromosomes define biological sex, he says. The problem, according to the professor, is that the test does not show how the SRY gene functions or whether testosterone is produced. In other words, biological sex is much more complex.

Patiño recommends a case-by-case practice for sex testing and possible exclusion. A more general regulation had catastrophic consequences for her. Exclusion and humiliation drained the joy out of sports.



*Maria José Martínez Patiño has served on various committees in the International Olympic Committee after her career. She also lectures at the University of Vigo. Photo: Private*

Still, she persevered. She put in hour after hour to qualify for the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. Then came the qualifying race. There, she ran *two hundredths of a second* too slowly. Thus, she never got to participate in the Olympics.

Today, she is not primarily remembered for her running results, but for the fight against overwhelming odds.

– Are you still angry?

– No, no, no. I am proud! For having dealt with the problem that came to me.

She believes she will be remembered as brave. A brave woman.

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