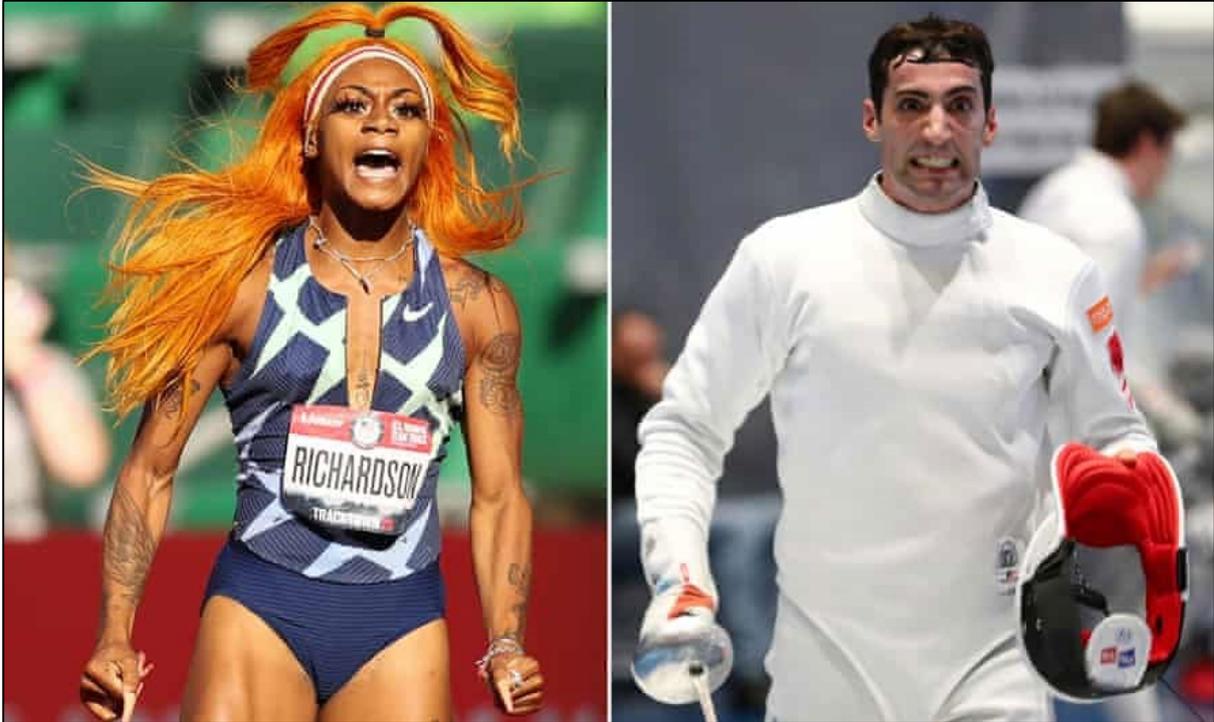


Sha'Carri Richardson, Alen Hadzic and our unending forgiveness for white male athletes

The differing treatment of a black female athlete and a white male in the run-up to the Olympics show the double standards that permeate sport



The US sprinter Sha'Carri Richardson (left), who was suspended for a positive test for marijuana, and Alen Hadzic, an alternate on the US fencing team who has faced accusations of sexual assault.

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In seemingly less time than Sha'Carri Richardson's world-stopping, 100m triumph at the US trials, the matter of her Olympic-disqualifying suspension for a positive marijuana test has transformed routine sports talk fodder into a full-blown ethical debate for a divided nation.

In her defense marijuana is legal in a host of states across America, including Oregon, where Richardson went full That Girl while stamping her ticket to Tokyo. But on the flip side this is still America, the puritanical-feigning, War on Drugs-waging nation that's been championing for marijuana's inclusion on Wada's banned substance list ever since Cheech & Chong started lampooning weed as the palliative of choice for the chronically lazy.

Rather than stoke these flames, Richardson accepted responsibility and didn't much campaign to run in the Olympic 4x100m. And even though the event postdates her suspension, USA Track & Field argued that placing her on the team anyway would have been unfair to her American rivals who had competed fair and square. While Jenna Prandini and Gabby Thomas replace Richardson in the 100m and 4x100m respectively (that's right; it takes two), the 21-year-old Dallas native walks the ESPYs

red carpet, stars in commercials for Nike and Beats by Dre and otherwise casts an acrylic neon shadow on the Games. No, it wasn't a perfect resolution. But it seemed like a win-win. Or at least it did until Alen Hadzic entered the chat.

Going into these Games, few figured to be checking for Hadzic, the 29-year-old épée alternate on a US team that was a longshot to win a medal. The notable exception: six female fencers who wrote to the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) in May demanding for an Olympic ban for Hadzic, the prime focus of an investigation into multiple accusations of sexual assault.

That's all according to a BuzzFeed News report that, among other bombshells, reveals USA Fencing's attempt to reach a compromise with a "safety plan" to protect fencers – not least two women who were signatories on the USOPC letter – from Hadzic, who was prohibited from international competition as recently as last month before a successful appeal. The plan included flying him to Tokyo apart from his teammates, excluding him from the opening ceremony's parade of nations and putting him up in a hotel about 25 minutes from the athletes village. And when Hadzic further appealed those restrictions ("I don't have the experience that I earned," he lamented to USA Today), Team USA's entire roster of fencers signed another letter demanding they stay in place.

While Hadzic denies the allegations against him, the USOPC and USA Fencing ducked blame – telling BuzzFeed News that the authority to determine Hadzic's Olympic eligibility rested with the United States Center for SafeSport, a body charged with protecting young athletes from sexual, emotional and physical abuse following the conviction of former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar.

But despite formal reports from three women about Hadzic and 10 more testifying to a decade-long history of alleged sexual predation that includes an investigation that resulted in a six-month ban from Columbia University while he was a member of their team, the best SafeSport could do was temporarily suspend him for the month of June as their fact-finding continues. And as much as it helps to be thorough about allegations of this nature, at this point you have to wonder what else the SafeSport leadership team needs to see.

What's more, Olympic athletes have been disciplined for less. US hammer thrower Gwen Berry became a Kaepernick-sized strawwoman after daring to raise a fist during the national anthem at the 2019 Pan Am Games, a protest act that resulted in a year-long probation and tens of thousands of dollars in lost sponsorship. John Carlos, a father of the Olympic protest movement, hasn't received so much as an apology from the IOC since it all but ended his career and Tommie Smith's when the two sprinters were in their primes. And all because their black power homage in the summer of 1968 was deemed more offensive than the Nazi salutes of the summer of 1936. "I confronted the IOC about an apology," Carlos told the Guardian's Etan Thomas. "They told me: 'We didn't do anything to you. The United State Olympic Committee did that to you.'" Not surprisingly, the USOPC hasn't apologized either.



Gwen Berry of the USA, a hammer thrower, was sanctioned for raising her fist at the 2019 Pan Am Games.

Worse, the extra effort to protect Hadzic is yet another reminder of just how differently the rules are applied to a straight white man of means, history's most empathetic character by 100m. While Hadzic has never discussed how he identifies personally, there is no doubt white athletes are treated differently to black athletes, particularly in America. Major League Baseball says pitcher Trevor Bauer is "on leave," not suspended after sexual assault allegations. Sexual assault allegations against NFL quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, which he settled out of court, had no material effect on his career. Nor were Peyton Manning's pro prospects damaged by a University of Tennessee athletic trainer's sexual assault claims (also settled out of court).

Meanwhile, the black high school football player who draws a long prison sentence for statutory rape after having sex with a slightly younger white classmate, even as that woman deems it consensual, is more than a hackneyed subgenre of the college football recruiting beat; it's a continuation of an antebellum tradition that lies at the very founding of rape law in America. (Marcus Dixon, the LA Rams new assistant defensive line coach, is the rare conviction that's overturned.) Hell, even Tiger Woods was deserted by his sponsors, publicly scolded by the likes of Augusta National chairman Billy Payne and otherwise demonized as a dark threat to pure-hearted white women everywhere after he was outed as a serial adulterer.

Yes, there are outliers. But for every Kobe Bryant or Duke lacrosse team, it seems, there are too many guys like Brock Turner, the Stanford swimmer who was convicted of the statutory rape of an unconscious woman and walked free after serving half of his six-month sentence. (Not that that stopped him from filing an appeal anyway.) And all because a California judge found Turner to be eminently worth forgiveness. "Obviously, a prison sentence would have a severe impact on him," the judge said in his decision. "I do find that his remorse is genuine."

Hadzic has not been convicted of any crime. But why take him to Tokyo when so many of his teammates are uncomfortable around him? The NFL and MLB regularly suspend players after sexual misconduct allegations against them – even if no criminal charges are filed. Hadzic, it seems, is just as easily summed up as a good boy who means no harm of course. The son of immigrants from the former Yugoslavia, he started out obsessed with soccer before a Montclair High classmate convinced him to take up fencing, which was sold to him as Pirates of the Caribbean cosplay. From there Hadzic quickly emerged as a national standout and Olympic hopeful who'd narrowly miss the cut for the Rio Games.

In Tokyo Hadzic was an alternate who could only watch as countrymen Jake Hoyle, Yeisser Ramirez and Curtis McDowald suffered opening-round losses on Sunday – although it's tough to say from exactly how far given the darkness that enveloped the fencing *piste*. So it would appear Hadzic's Olympic journey has reached an end. That he managed to get this far in the first place doesn't just refute the notion that white men can indeed be canceled. It goes to show that even for this beleaguered Olympiad, there's only one true standard that abides: the double standard