

# [***The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics Just Showed Us How to Protect Women | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BSD-1WN1-DY68-1008-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** Brad Polumbo

**Highlight:** Most Americans want to see our fellow citizens who identify as trans treated with dignity and respect; but also don't want that to come at women's expense.

**Body**

Few topics in modern ***politics*** are as divisive as the debate over transgender issues and women's rights. But one new development offers hope that, at least in some corners, light is winning out over heat.

The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) regulates college athletics for 241 small colleges, with its authority reaching 83,000 athletes in 25 different sports. The NAIA just [*released new rules*](https://apnews.com/article/naia-transgender-ban-ad422f3a86ebcc4db618750c6a5d1c5f) restricting the participation of trans athletes in women's sports—and these rules are a model for how to ensure fairness for women while treating transgender people with compassion and dignity.

Under the new rules, "all athletes may participate in NAIA-sponsored male sports but only athletes whose biological sex assigned at birth is female and have not begun hormone therapy will be allowed to participate in women's sports," the *Associated Press*[*reports*](https://apnews.com/article/naia-transgender-ban-ad422f3a86ebcc4db618750c6a5d1c5f).

The AP further [*notes*](https://apnews.com/article/naia-transgender-ban-ad422f3a86ebcc4db618750c6a5d1c5f) that a student "who has begun hormone therapy may participate in activities such as workouts, practices and team activities, but not in intercollegiate competition."

Notably, these rules do not apply to a select few sports like competitive cheer and dance, which are open to students of either sex.

"We know there are a lot of opinions, and a lot of people have a very emotional reaction to this, and we want to be respectful of all that," NAIA President and CEO Jim Carr [*said*](https://apnews.com/article/naia-transgender-ban-ad422f3a86ebcc4db618750c6a5d1c5f). "But we feel like our primary responsibility is fairness in competition, so we are following that path. And we've tried as best we could to allow for some participation by all."

This is absolutely the right call.

Women's sports exist as a separate category for a reason. While it may be verboten to acknowledge this in progressive circles these days, there are [*biological differences*](https://academic.oup.com/edrv/article/39/5/803/5052770) between males and females that sharply influence strength, speed, and other highly relevant factors.

Extensive scientific evidence documents this reality, but you can also just trust your own eyes. Remember, the U.S. women's soccer team—arguably one of the world's best among women—nonetheless [*lost in a scrimmage*](https://www.cbssports.com/soccer/news/a-dallas-fc-under-15-boys-squad-beat-the-u-s-womens-national-team-in-a-scrimmage/) to a professional men's team's under-15s squad compromised of teenage boys.

Yes, seriously: That's how extreme the biological differences between the sexes can be!

While the cross-sex hormone therapy that most transgender-identifying people receive reduces these differences, many studies show that it [*does not eliminate them entirely*](https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/trans-women-retain-athletic-edge-after-year-hormone-therapy-study-n1252764). Moreover, some of the biological differences between males and females manifest in things like height, wingspan, bone density, heart size, lung capacity, and other things that aren't ever undone by taking hormone therapy, even if one takes it for many years.

Few examples reveal these disparities better than that of [*Lia Thomas*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/lia-thomas?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). The former UPenn swimmer, who is a biological male, transitioned during college and went from competing on the men's swimming team to competing on the women's team. According to [*Swimming World Magazine*](https://www.swimmingworldmagazine.com/news/a-look-at-the-numbers-and-times-no-denying-the-advantages-of-lia-thomas/), Lia Thomas "soared from a mid-500s ranking (554th in the 200 freestyle; all divisions) in men's competition to one of the top-ranked swimmers in women's competition."

That's ... not a coincidence.

It's simply unfair—and, in many cases, unsafe—to allow biologically male transgender athletes to compete in women's sports. It not only compromises the integrity of the competitions, it gives opportunities and scholarships intended for female students to male students. By enforcing this bright red line, the NAIA isn't being unduly discriminatory—it's doing right by female athletes.

All of that said, transgender people typically struggle with gender dysphoria, a serious mental health condition, and they deserve compassion, respect, and accommodation, within reason.

The NAIA's new rules take meaningful steps to embody this empathy, without compromising the integrity of women's sports.

For example, it is important to note that the NAIA does not prohibit transgender men—who are biologically female—from competing in men's sports. This is exactly the right distinction to make, because trans men are only putting themselves at a potential disadvantage by switching to the men's team, so to exclude them is unnecessary and gratuitous.

The NAIA's approach contrasts with some other efforts by governmental and regulatory bodies that force both trans men and women to compete as their birth sex, which makes little sense logically and is thus motivated by either ignorance or genuine anti-transgender animus.

So, too, the NAIA's conscious decision to allow transgender women athletes to participate in practices, team activities, and workouts, as well as in sports like cheerleading and dance that aren't sex-segregated, shows that they truly aren't driven by any desire to exclude or marginalize transgender people, though hysterical critics will surely insist otherwise.

Most Americans want to see our fellow citizens who identify as transgender treated with dignity and respect; but also don't want that to come at women's expense. Striking this balance isn't easy, but it's certainly not impossible, as the NAIA just showed us.

*Brad Polumbo (*[*@Brad\_Polumbo*](https://twitter.com/brad_polumbo)*) is an independent journalist, co-founder of* [*BASEDPolitics*](https://www.based-politics.com/)*, and* [*YouTuber.*](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UClFUXoMmjzaeD5RjGPNGHSQ)

*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2225571/lia-thomas-university-pennsylvania.jpg)

**Graphic**

Lia Thomas University of Pennsylvania

Justin Casterline/Getty Images

Lia Thomas of the University of Pennsylvania stands on the podium after winning the 500-yard freestyle, March 17, 2022 in Atlanta, Georgia.

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