

Athlete Voices:

Personal Narratives on the Effects of Anti-Transgender Policies in College Athletics

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Introduction

The participation of transgender athletes in college athletics has been a contentious topic in the past several years. Various states and colleges have proposed anti-transgender bills that bar transgender athletes from competing in sports in accordance with their gender identity. The arguments in support of such laws tend to focus on fairness, safety, and competitive fairness. Such policies, however, also pose basic issues of equality, discrimination, and communication's role in influencing social views. This study examines the problems transgender athletes encounter, the biological and hormonal distinctions between transgender and cisgender athletes, and the more extensive consequences for fairness, equity, and safety throughout college sports.

The timeliness of this topic in the field of communications is the concentration on how the media, public discourse, and language build knowledge about marginalized societies. Whether and how transgender players are represented by the media and publicly discussed will either reinforce stereotypes, understanding, and inclusion. Communication is the key to informed, compassionate debate on challenging topics such as gender identity and sporting equity. Through this essay, I will concentrate on three significant aspects. Firstly, it will discuss at length the challenges for transgender athletes, such as social stigma and structural barriers. Secondly, it will consider the biological and hormonal distinctions between transgender and cisgender athletes, discussing in detail the perceived advantages of transgender women participating in women's sports. Third, I will discuss concepts of equity to cisgender men and women.

Review of the Literature

Gender Segregation in Sports

The gender segregation of sports competitions has been a fundamental principle in the sporting world, founded on the awareness of physical disparities between males and females. Men possess more muscle, denser bones, and bigger lungs, which overall are being interpreted as greater athletic abilities. Early in the 20th century, all of these were even stronger, and single sex sports were developed to provide similar competition for female athletes. Title IX was created in 1972 as an act, introducing this gender divide and affording women similar access to studies and sports divisions. This has provided opportunities for more women into sport, more girls participating, and access to scholarship and fund-raising opportunities that they previously did not have. All this was altered by the entry of transgender athletes into college sports, which initiated a debate regarding fairness, inclusion, and the feasibility of dividing competitions based on gender.

More transgender athletes have been competing in college athletics in recent years due to society becoming more accepting and regulations changing. The NCAA, for instance, has created regulations allowing transgender women to compete in women's athletics after undergoing one year of treatment to suppress testosterone. These regulations have been highly criticized. State lawmakers have passed a record number of anti-transgender sports bills since 2020. The aim of this legislation is to prevent transgender children from competing in sports based on their gender identity. A close reading of the bills reveals the fact that "protecting women's sports" is a phrase used by a subset of anti-LGBTQ+ Christian conservatives and trans-exclusionary radical feminists.

The Main Issue

Inclusion and Equity

At the center of the argument is the argument between inclusion and equity. Advocates for the inclusion of transgender athletes believe that every athlete should have the opportunity to play sports based on their gender identity while emphasizing acceptance of diversity. According to advocates, it would be discriminatory and would deprive transgender athletes of more potential self-development and opportunities if they aren't able to participate in sports. Supporters of the view of exclusion argue that it becomes difficult to compete with males if transgender females are allowed to compete with cisgender females. This leads to unfair competition, which may undermine the whole integrity of women's sports and may take away scholarships, awards, and opportunities from cisgender women. The debate is made even more emotional by concerns about safety, especially in contact sports, where physical size and strength differences pose concerns over safety for cisgender athletes. Sports such as boxing, rugby, martial arts could become a safety risk for ciswomen. As this debate continues, it raises tough questions as to how to find a balance between inclusion and the ideals of equal competition.

However, an issue revolving accepting trans gender in sports and allowing them to share restroom and locker rooms with cisgender is a big controversial subject. The issue of gender and bathrooms is a sensitive subject. The controversy over open facilities and shower and locker rooms still rages on. Transgender athletes in sports are a complicated matter beyond the game. It is all about balancing equity, competitive fairness, and full access to opportunity, and as a result, the discussion is less a straightforward debate about

participation and more a matter of ideological refinement. Traditionally, sport is gender divided, but evolving notions of gender identity complicate policies reflecting inclusiveness versus fairness at the competitive level and require careful balance. There are many issues around inclusion for trans in sports to take account of, which is challenging to look at all aspects and find a solution for all.

Balancing inclusion and fairness with recognizing concerns from all is apparently the most challenging hurdle. Cisgender competitors may be worried about their comfort and privacy because, for example, using a bathroom or locker room with opposite-sex teammates, especially ones with different physical appearances, would be embarrassing or uncomfortable. According to Elizabeth A. Sharrow (2021), “As Beauchamp (2019), Davis (2020), and Stratford (2020) note, “enduring single-sex institutions, like women’s colleges, have frequently drawn the unique ire of anti-trans forces where gender transgressive people are frequently targeted”. This heightened scrutiny extends to the debate over access to bathrooms and locker rooms, where “surveillance of transgender people is often most acute where sex-based identities are the most salient” (Davis, 2018, Nanney & Brunnsma, 2017). These tensions demonstrate why sports remain a major battleground in the larger conversation about gender and inclusion”.

The concerns surrounding gendered facilities are not just about privacy and comfort but also concerns with legal protections and institutional policies. Various colleges and sports organizations have been challenged by trying to establish policies that accommodate transgender athletes' rights and the concerns of the cisgender athlete. There are colleges that had gender neutral change stalls or secluded stalls to provide an option for those who would feel embarrassed. However, not all institutions are able or willing to

make such changes, and therefore many students find themselves in the midst of a difficult controversy without resolution.

The Impact of Puberty on Athletic Performance

For starters, male puberty brings a big advantage in the physique of an athlete. There are surges in testosterone, bone growth, muscular development, and lungs. Boys generally develop significantly more upper body strength than girls, and they also tend to have greater lower body strength. These differences are a result of the physical changes that occur during male puberty, such as increased muscle mass and bone density. These differences contribute particularly to disciplines that depend on strength like sprinting, weightlifting, and swimming. For instance, studies have shown that transgender women are potentially faster runners and have more muscle mass than cisgender women through one year of HRT. This indicates that hormone treatments are not completely able to undo all effects of male puberty.

The discussion around sports classification brings up important questions about how athletes should be categorized, either by their biological sex or gender identity. Traditionally, athletes have been categorized into male and female based on biological sex, but this has become difficult regarding how individuals perceive themselves and express their biological gender. While there may be varying opinion on the topic, this approach would also account for the individual way in which each person's body develops and operates, since gender is recognized as multifaceted and with many variables outside of biological sex that influence sporting capacity.

Public Narratives and Social Views

The Role of Media and Public Perception

Above all, issues like how the media report transgender athletes go a long way in influencing public opinion. While their achievement is emphasized in some, their inclusion being celebrated and strength, while others focus on controversies and concerns about fairness and the impact on cisgender women. Such biased reporting creates intense arguments, forcing people to choose sides on whether transgender athletes should compete. This unfortunately makes the discussion much like a battlefield rather than a discussion, often leaving transgender people stuck in the middle.

Ongoing media coverage and critique takes a toll on their mental health and feeling of acceptance, making it difficult to reach a compromised solution. This is a big issue, and rather than merely planning to exclude transgender athletes or turn a blind eye to the grievances of cisgender women, there must surely be better ways to resolve it. It was thought that allowing them to compete in a separate category of their own, while still providing some kind of honor to them while in the process diminishing the impact of their participation on the category of cisgender women, is one solution. Others include imposing certain eligibility criteria based on hormone levels for transgender athletes, which might specify a set period during which hormone therapy. These might be ideas worth exploring, with measured consideration and expert input.

The Personal Perspective

Experiences of Trans- Masculine Athletes in the NCAA

After reading the Human Kinetics Journal article “I’m the Kind of Trans They Don’t Care About,” which features an interview with a transmasculine athlete named Dylan, I gained insight into the struggles of gender identity faced by transmasculine athletes in NCAA sports, particularly under strict gender regulations. It is based on the interviews of

13 trans-masculine athletes, among whom is Dylan, a 22-year-old swimmer in Division III. Like most trans-masculine athletes, Dylan carries a folder with him to each meet with his medical exemptions and NCAA paperwork, not because he's been confronted as he explains, but because the increased anti-trans rhetoric around athletes like Lia Thomas makes him feel unsafe and unsupported, "I carry [it] with me to every meet I go to, but I've never needed it. But I always carry it just in case, and especially after everything happened with Lia [Thomas], I was like, 'I need to carry this for my own safety.'" This testimony give evidence that trans-masculine athletes, even in far fewer instances of direct policy struggle with public challenges.

The article connects the experiences of trans-masculine athletes to the lack of attention given to policies affecting trans women, who are frequently viewed as a danger to women's sports. By August 2023, 23 many states have enacted laws that establish an avenue of legal restrictions barring transgender athletes from participating in sports or competing in sporting competitions, only a handful of laws target specifically trans-masculine athletes. NCAA eligibility criteria are strict for trans women and tend to define trans men as a threat to women's athletics. Their journeys are indicative of the challenges involved in being both a transgender person and an athlete, often making it hard to embrace completely who they are.

Hypotheses

For my first hypotheses, Athletes' narratives suggest that anti-transgender policies negatively affect team cohesion, inclusivity, and overall perceptions of fairness in college athletics. This examines the argument that anti-transgender policies in college athletics negatively impact team cohesion, inclusivity, and fairness. My second hypotheses are about colleges that enforce stricter anti-transgender policies see a declines in athlete participation and overall sports engagement among LGBTQ+ students.

Thematic Analysis

Anti-transgender policies in collegiate athletics have a negative impact on team unity, inclusion, and fairness, as well as on LGBTQ+ athlete participation. The policies result in team splits, isolating athletes and undermining team morale. Most athletes perceive such restrictions as being unfair, thinking that fairness must include equal opportunity and not merely physical ability. Stricter colleges see fewer students getting involved in sports because LGBTQ+ athletes often avoid places where they feel unwelcome or out of place. Online communities recognize that most would rather go to more accepting colleges, and these are some of the sources of talent disparities and participation. To solve this issue, I will conduct research by gathering interviews and comments from college athletes on transgender inclusion in sports. Also, I will analyze brief videos and dialogue on Facebook to determine the views of the public. The evidence provides the concept that more inclusive policies can benefit both teams and athletic participation overall.

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