

Picked Last: A Review of Transgender Athletes' Experiences in Sport

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Introduction

Transgender persons have a long and complex history in relation to their participation in sport and sports' governing bodies. Indeed, these athletes have a unique and often strained relationship with their gender identity, the sport they play, and with their teammates. This strained relationship is often exacerbated by participation policies and the sporting organizations that develop them.

Discussions of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion are rampant in many organizations and social domains. The focus of these discussions is most often on how to make organizations more equitable, inclusive, and diverse. Although there is always some pushback, for the most part these discussions are welcome. Yet, in the realm of transgender athletes in sport, discussions of inclusion are often divisive and controversial. At the time of writing, this controversy has had a very public face in Lia Thomas, the transgender NCAA swimmer who competes for the University of Pennsylvania. Thomas, who previously swam for the men's team, is now competing for the women's team under controversy from media outlets, sporting organizations, and from her own teammates (Sanchez, 2022). Thomas, who has been dominating the women's category since competing in it, has since become the first transgender athlete to win an NCAA division I title (Sanchez, 2022). Thomas' success as an out transgender swimmer acts as much needed representation for transgender athletes at the collegiate level. However, Lia Thomas' success may be confined to the NCAA, because the world governing body of swimming, FINA, has recently introduced a new, restrictive transgender policy (Fahey, 2022). The new policy states that transgender competitors must have completed their medical transition before the age of 12, effectively disqualifying many athletes, including Thomas, who began her transition in 2019 at the age of 20 (Fahey, 2022).

This policy has been met with backlash not only from transgender athletes, but from medical professionals who question the arbitrary age of 12, and who suggest that it is nearly impossible to medically transition at such an early age (Fahey, 2022). Policy that is openly discriminatory against transgender athletes is not unique to swimming, with other governing bodies having similar rules. Expecting transgender athletes to transition so early is an unreasonable expectation set by FINA, and feeds into the pseudoscience of one sex being genetically inferior to another. With Thomas herself quoted as saying, “The very simple answer is that I’m not a man. I’m a woman, so I belong on the women’s team,” it is clear how simple the argument is, and is evidence of the harm exclusive policies like FINA’s cause (Sanchez, 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to examine transgender athletes and the organizations and social domains in which they exist and compete. To do so, pertinent literature from 2010 to 2022 in the following journals were reviewed: the International Review for the Sociology of Sport, Journal of Sport and Social Issues, the Sociology of Sport Journal, Communication & Sport, Journal of the Philosophy of Sport, Sport Management Review, Sport, Ethics and Philosophy, Frontiers in Sport and Active Living, and the Recreational Sports Journal. These journals were chosen because of their high impact factor within the field of the sociology of sport and queer methodology. All articles reviewed considered transgender athletes and related policy. Three themes emerged from this review: transgender policy in sport, transgender inclusion in sport, and the different standards in sport for transgender versus cisgender women. Each theme will be discussed in greater detail below. To conclude, the limited scope of literature on this topic will be addressed by identifying various gaps in the literature. To set the stage for this discussion, at the outset it is important to discuss how the transgendered athlete policy has evolved for arguably the most powerful sporting federation in the world, the International Olympic Committee.

International Olympic Committee Policies

Perhaps the most prominent sporting organization in the world, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), has a long and varied history with sporting policy regarding transgender athletes. Indeed, its policies have set precedent for other policies across various levels of sport, from elite to collegiate to little leagues in small towns. Therefore, to fully understand the relationship between transgender athletes and sporting policies, the IOC's lengthy history must be discussed.

Beginning in 2003, the IOC implemented the Stockholm consensus, allowing transgender athletes to compete in the Olympic games (Statement of the Stockholm consensus, 2003, p. 1). However, the parameters of this policy were exclusionary and medically invasive, only allowing the participation of transgender athletes who had undergone complete gender reaffirming surgeries two years prior to competition, including hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and genital surgery (Statement of the Stockholm consensus, 2003, p. 1). This policy was a double-edged sword for many transgender athletes; although it broke barriers by allowing for transgender participation in the most elite sporting event, it excluded athletes, and set a precedent for medically invasive and unreasonable policies for years to come. Twelve years later in 2015, the IOC revisited their policy, and implemented more inclusive regulations. The 2015 policy, based on new, limited research surrounding HRT and its effects on athletic ability, permitted the participation of all transgender male athletes without restriction, and the participation of transgender female athletes if they had completed HRT for a minimum of 12 months prior to competition (IOC Consensus Meeting, 2015, p. 2). Moreover, the new policy insisted transgender and cisgender female athletes have a total testosterone level in serum below 10 nanomoles/litre for a minimum of 12 months prior to competition. Notably this number that has

been lauded as arbitrary and unattainable by various experts (IOC Consensus Meeting, 2015, p. 2; De la Cretaz, 2022). This policy, while more inclusive than the one from 2003, is still exclusive, and based on under-researched pseudoscientific ideas suggesting that testosterone is directly related to athletic abilities. It also upholds the idea that females are inherently inferior to males, because transgender males can compete with no barriers (De la Cretaz, 2022).

Most recently, in March of 2022, the International Olympic Committee came out with a new framework for transgender athletes, claiming to be based in fairness, inclusion, and non-discrimination (IOC Framework, 2022, p. 1). In a drastic overhaul of previous policies, the IOC has now determined that each individual sport within Olympic competition must develop their own guidelines, with no pressure for transgender athletes to engage in invasive, medical procedures, or genital examinations. As well, the framework encourages policies to enable transgender athletes to compete in whichever category they feel most comfortable with (IOC Framework, 2022, pp. 2-5). Moreover, while new IOC policy still promotes fair play, stating, “At the same time, the credibility of competitive sport – and particularly high-level organized sporting competitions – relies on a level playing field, where no athlete has an unfair and disproportionate advantage over the rest”, the inclusivity of the policy is unprecedented, especially at the most elite of levels (IOC Framework, 2022, p. 1). However, with other elite sporting organizations such as FINA or World Athletics still having restrictive, exclusionary policies in place for transgender athletes, the precedent previously set by the IOC may continue to have a lasting impact across those athletes.

Transgender Policy in Sport

When examining transgender persons in sport, it is important to consider the many different policies regarding their participation eligibility and how the policies vary by sport. In

general, the literature suggests that there are discrepancies between policies from different governing bodies, in different sports, and at different levels of competition. Indeed, policies vary around three key issues: inclusivity, a lack of nuance, and a disconnect between physiological and sociological phenomena. Each of these issues is discussed in further detail below.

The literature suggests that there is a lack of inclusivity for differing transgender bodies. Policies developed by various governing bodies of sport attempt to implement “one size fits all” methods, failing to consider that not all transgender individuals have the same lives, have medically or socially transitioned, or have transitioned at the same point in life (Buzuvis, 2021; Pecoraro and Pitts, 2020; Posbergh, 2022; Reynolds and Jahromi, 2021; Sullivan, 2011; Torres et al., 2022). Policy in major organisations such as the IOC (discussed above) or World Athletics (formerly the IAAF), clearly demonstrate this one size fits all approach. As noted, in 2003 the IOC implemented the Stockholm Consensus, allowing transgender athletes to compete so long as they had medically transitioned with hormone therapy and surgery - essentially stipulating that all transgender athletes fit into one category and excluding those who identify as transgendered but have not gone through medical transition (Sullivan, 2011). This policy has faced multiple critiques because it promotes the idea that gender verification is necessary, and that a transgender athlete’s gender must be scrutinized in order to compete alongside cisgender athletes (Sullivan, 2011). Like the IOC, other sporting organizations such as World Athletics, NCAA, and FINA have policies mandating that transgender individuals fit within certain medically based parameters, to be eligible to compete (Fahey, 2022; Reynolds and Jahromi, 2021; Sullivan, 2011). And, the state of Ohio has recently implemented legislation that would require athletes to submit to an invasive, genital based gender confirmation examination if someone questioned an athlete’s sex (Rosenberg, 2022). In short, the tendency is for major governing bodies to stipulate

invasive, medical procedures for transgender athletes to compete, forcing different individuals with different life experiences to all fit within stringent physiologically based categories.

Moreover, the literature reveals similar policies at the elite collegiate and recreational levels (Pecoraro and Pitts, 2020; Reynolds and Jahromi, 2021). Transgender athletes in recreational sport leagues in collegiate settings have reported their institutions' policies as being exclusive to transgender individuals, citing exclusive language and an enforced gender binary (Pecoraro and Pitts, 2020). Language such as *male/female leagues*, *gender expression/identity* were specifically cited as exclusive, implying sex segregation and the idea that gender expression must match gender identity, something that is not accurate for many transgender people (Pecoraro and Pitts, 2020).

The literature also reveals the ways in which policies related to transgender athletes lack nuance, and often fail to consider the lived experiences of transgender athletes, instead, relying solely on what works on paper (Pecoraro and Pitts, 2020; Posbergh, 2022; Torres et al., 2022). For example, Pecoraro and Pitts put forth the argument that while collegiate organizations such as NIRSA employ practitioners to get a sense for the needs of transgender athletes in order to develop the appropriate policy, the policies developed do not reflect the real world needs of these individuals (2020, p. 72). This is seen throughout the study. Although it was acknowledged that policies were crafted with inclusive intentions, the language used was identified by transgender persons as exclusive based on it being heavily gendered and revealing a disconnect between lived experience and policy (Pecoraro and Pitts, 2020, pp. 70-72).

Transgender Inclusion in Sport

Transgender persons in sport experience adversity in many ways, particularly through the exclusive, alienating policies implemented by various sporting organizations. Feelings of

exclusivity are major barriers to transgender participation in sport and are a major theme within this review of literature. To a large extent, the literature indicates a lack of inclusion for transgender persons amongst cisgender athletes, with exclusionary forces originating from cisgender teammates, coaches, spectators, or at times, other transgender and queer athletes (Gleaves and Lehrbach, 2016; Hargie et al., 2017; Kavoura et al., 2021; Travers and Deri, 2010; Travers, 2013). Indeed, an examination of the literature reveals three key ways in which transgender athletes face exclusionary phenomena in sport; cisheteronormativity within sport, exclusionary policies based on fair play, and alienation from other trans and queer athletes. These exclusionary practices are discussed in greater detail below.

The literature demonstrates the exclusion of transgender athletes in sports with cisheteronormative culture, and the consequences of such exclusivity. The culture surrounding sport is often reflected in rigidly enforced sex binaries, with consequences for those who do not fit the mold for what a male or female athlete “should” be (Hargie et al., 2017, p. 225). These feelings of exclusivity by transgender athletes manifest in different ways: through sex segregated locker rooms, social exclusion from teammates, and the fear of being outed (Hargie et al., 2017; Kavoura et al., 2021). One such example of this comes from Hargie et al., wherein 10 self-identified transgender athletes were interviewed on their lived experiences within various sports (2017). According to one of the athletes, a transgender man, sex-segregated locker rooms and the fear of being outed were his largest barriers to sport, saying, “The biggest issue was changing. You know, because before that I was attempting to be someone that I never was. But once you actually make the decision that you can’t do that anymore, then you are effectively excluded because you’re neither one nor the other,” (Hargie et al., 2017, p. 230).

Themes of exclusivity were consistent in the literature, with transgender persons often citing the presence of sex-segregated locker/changing rooms as reason enough to not participate in sport, or to be cautious when doing so in fear of being outed. In some cases, transgender athletes were even asked to use the locker room of their gender assigned at birth (Hargie et al., 2017, p. 226; Kavoura et al., 2021, pp. 7-8). Beyond exclusion, some transgender athletes revealed that locker rooms create an unsafe space for transgender persons and are stressful for transgender persons because they fear making teammates and *other* people uncomfortable (Hargie et al., 2017, p. 230). Moreover, cisheteronormativity in sport is further exacerbated not only by sex segregated locker rooms, but by the sports themselves.

A common issue that is interrogated in much of the literature is the idea that fair play is not possible if transgendered athletes are allowed to compete. This is most often the case when considering sports deemed “female”. In this case, there are many exclusionary policies directed towards transgender individuals based on the idea that a fair playing field must be maintained for their cisgender opponents most often cisgender women (Gleaves and Lehrbach, 2016; Reynolds and Jahromi, 2021; Sullivan, 2011). However, a review of the literature suggests that this argument often falls flat, with many sources indicating that the physiological differences between men and women are not enough to justify sex segregated sports (Gleaves and Lehrbach, 2016; Travers and Deri, 2016; Travers, 2013). Examples of this can be found in Gleaves and Lehrbach’s work (2016). They argue that when comparing differing levels of testosterone in transgender and cisgender women, especially when other physiological differences are considered, no *unfair* advantage emerges for transgender women when it comes to athletic ability (2016, p. 313). Furthermore, various governing bodies, such as the IOC, have differing policies for transgender men and women, with the IOC at the time of publication allowing those who

have transitioned to men immediately eligible to compete (Gleaves and Lehrbach, 2016, p. 311). If sport organizations and their policies were truly committed to fair play, then they would be concerned that cisgender men have an unfair advantage over the transgender male athletes. Indeed, this is a gap that is consistent through various policies and reveals the need for these exclusionary policies to be re-evaluated. Further to this, Travers (2013) compares skills between cisgender male and female athletes in baseball and softball. They note that sex bifurcation in sport is not based on skill and as a result, even if young cisgender female athletes are just as skilled as their male counterparts they are pushed into the “inferior” feminine sport of softball (2013, pp. 85-86). Even further, Travers details how baseball is not a sport that depends upon strength or size, advancing the argument that sex segregation for many sports is unnecessary, and an exclusionary force against transgender athletes (2013, p. 85).

With the inclusion of transgender athletes being threatened by cisheteronormative sporting environments as well as sex segregation based on fair play arguments, the literature also shows that exclusionary practices occur from within the community from other queer and transgender athletes (Travers and Deri, 2010). Examples of this can be seen when examining the experiences of transgender men and women on lesbian softball teams, seen in the ways transgender men reported feelings of hostility from their cisgender lesbian teammates for changing their name or physically transitioning (Travers and Deri, 2010, pp. 494-495). Within this context, it was sometimes seen as a betrayal of sisterhood to make the transition from butch cisgender lesbian to transgender man within the lesbian league (Travers and Deri, 2010, p. 495). Exclusion sometimes came from other transgender athletes in this context, with one transgender woman professing that having transgender men on a lesbian team makes them “look bad”, showcasing that exclusion can come from both sides, not just cisheteronormative society

(Travers and Deri, 2010, p. 450). While the literature on this specific phenomenon is limited, it is important to note how Travers and Deri's work showcases how vulnerable transgender athletes are to exclusion (2010).

Different Standards in Sport for Cisgender Women

The ways in which transgender individuals face adversity in sport through restrictive policies and exclusive experiences in sport also emerges in the literature. It is important to note the ways in which these discriminatory experiences affect transgender and cisgender athletes differently, particularly cisgender and transgender women. A consideration of the literature showcases the different standards in sport for cisgender and transgender women, with double standards emerging in regard to what constitutes success, or what is considered the "ideal" body (Fischer and McClearen, 2019; Washington and Economides, 2015).

As mentioned previously, the literature at hand reveals the phenomenon of fair play often touted as the justification for the exclusion of transgender athletes, on the basis that the presence of transgender women will effectively make for unfair competition against their cisgender peers. This ideology, as identified by Fischer and McClearen, is particularly damaging in relation to transgender mixed martial arts fighter Fallon Fox, whose own experiences with the sport reveal the unreasonable expectations her and other transgender female athletes are held to (2019, p. 150). As mentioned earlier, the pseudoscientific belief that cisgender women are inherently inferior to men prevails in most of the sports, with the viciously aggressive sport of MMA fighting upholding this belief fervently (Fischer and McClearen, 2019, pp. 150-152). In such an aggressive sport, Fox herself believes that there should be some forms of regulation of the spectrum of testosterone and estrogen levels some athletes may have, while still enabling transgender participation (Fischer and McClearen, 2019, p. 151). While this assertion is not

uncommon for transgender athletes to hold, it unfortunately does not resonate with many professionals involved with MMA fighting, with famous MMA commentator Joe Rogan quoted as saying:

If you had a dick at one point in time, you also have all the bone structure that comes with having a dick. You have bigger hands, you have bigger shoulder joints. You're a fucking man... She [Fox] has to fight guys... She's not really a she. She's a transgender post-op person. The operation doesn't shave down your bone density... Just the mechanical function of punching, a man can do it so much harder than a woman can, period. (p. 152).

Rogan's derogatory comments towards Fox reveal much more than just bigotry, but the thinking around fair play that leads to the exclusion of transgender female athletes like Fox. Moreover, this fair play thinking infiltrates other aspects of transgender athletes in sport, influencing the, "damned-if-she-wins, damned-if-she-doesn't", philosophy identified by Fischer and McClearen (2019, p. 161).

Through an analysis of Fallon Fox, Fischer and McClearen detail the "damned if she does, damned if she doesn't" mentality often associated with transgender female athletes, not just in the sport of MMA, but within other realms as well (2019). The phenomenon is described through the ways in which transgender athletes must "queerly" fail in order to be taken seriously by cisgender persons, meaning that if a transgender woman continuously dominates her sport, she will be touted as having an unfair biological advantage, and must fail in order to be seen as a "real" woman with no advantage (Fischer and McClearen, 2019, p. 158). An example of this comes from Fallon Fox's first, and only, professional loss in 2014 against cisgender fighter Ashlee Evans-Smith, wherein Fox was quoted as detailing the loss as a relief, noting, "Emotionally, I felt like I lost. I felt like a failure. But, at the same time, [it was] a huge plus

because everyone knows that I can lose now,” (Fischer and McClearen, 2019, p. 159). However, this loss also presents negatives in regard to Fox’s career, revealing that if a transgender woman never loses, she is condemned for having unfair advantages and if she loses, she is praised for being “real”, but must accept the consequences that come of this. The rhetoric that transgender women must lose in their sport in order to be seen as equal to cisgender women is unreasonable, and clearly represents the kind of exclusionary practices faced by transgender female athletes.

Although it has been acknowledged that transgender female athletes face exclusionary practices through the need to fail in order to be successful, the double standards in sport for transgender and cisgender female athletes prevail in other ways too. The literature suggests that there are double standards when it comes to body image, with muscular cisgender women touted as being strong and sexy, but with muscular transgender women viewed as “too manly”, (Washington and Economides, 2015; Fischer and McClearen, 2019). A clear example of this comes from Washington and Economides’ work on female CrossFit athletes, wherein visibly muscular, fit cisgender female bodies were touted as, “the new skinny”, or the most desirable (2015, p. 144). Again, Washington and Economides’ work reveals the desirability of the traditionally masculine body when it is seen on cisgender women, seen in CrossFit’s official marketing through a video entitled *Nasty Girls*, wherein muscular, cisgender women engage in gruelling CrossFit exercises, and are then lauded for it (2015, p. 149). In this sense, it is interesting to note how cis female bodies, that reflected physical fitness, were seen as just as or perhaps more feminine than other women’s’ bodies, whereas transgender women feel the pressure from society to conform to a small, soft female body in order to “pass”. While it should be noted as well that research on this specific phenomenon is limited, Washington and

Economides' work presents double standards in body image for cisgender versus transgender female athletes (2015).

Moreover, Washington and Economides' (2015) echo similar sentiments to Fischer and McClearen's (2019) work wherein traditionally masculine sports such as MMA and CrossFit grossly rely upon the female body to market themselves. As mentioned previously, transgender MMA fighter Fallon Fox has spoken openly on her experiences with MMA fighting, detailing how traditionally masculine sports such as CrossFit or MMA look to market the sex appeal of female athletes (Fischer and McClearen, 2019, p. 157). In one interview, Fox was quoted as saying, "They are looking to sell sex along with violence at the same time.... [T]hey want them [the women] not too beastly," (Fischer and McClearen, 2019, p. 157). This comes in stark contrast to Washington and Economides' work on female CrossFit athletes, wherein the muscular female body was seen as the new desirable body type for all women, and is perhaps a reflection of the double standards for cis and trans athletes (2019). While the literature surrounding body image and double standards for transgender versus cisgender female athletes is limited, it is important to note that these issues do arise, and that we hope further literature can close this gap.

Conclusion

The purpose of this review was twofold. First, it examined transgendered athletes' experiences within their sporting organizations and how transgender sport policy tends to be more exclusive than inclusive. The second purpose of this paper was to reveal research gaps in the existing literature. It has been made clear through a review of this literature that transgender policies in sport are often under-researched and exclusionary, feeding into the idea that women are genetically inferior to men (Devine, 2022; Sullivan, 2011; Pecoraro and Pitts, 2020;

Reynolds and Hamidian, 2021; Torres et al., 2022; Posbergh, 2022; and Buzuvis, 2021). As well, transgender policy not only affects transgender athletes negatively, but their cisgender counterparts as well, presenting the need for further discussion for both parties. Similarly, outside of policies, transgender policy in sport has been identified in the literature as a barrier to transgender participation, as issues surrounding inclusivity, sex-segregation, and insensitivity emerging as prominent themes (Hargie et al., 2017; Travers and Deri, 2010; Kavoura et al., 2021; Travers, 2013; and Gleaves and Lehrbach, 2016). Furthermore, pertinent to the issues transgender athletes face is the double standard between them and their cisgender peers, which has emerged in the literature as existing in body image and athletic performance (Fischer and McClearen, 2020; Washington and Economides, 2016). The literature pertaining to transgender athletes has revealed the forms of adversity faced by them within their own sports and communities, demonstrating the need for a reform across many avenues.

Research pertaining to transgender athletes is a contemporary field with a limited scope of literature. Consequently, this review has revealed various gaps. Namely, the lack of research on transgender men in sports, as well as a gap in the research of transgender individuals in team sports. Throughout this review, it was found that a vast majority of the literature focused on transgender women in sport. This could be attributed to the phenomenon surrounding “fair play”, and the supposed inferiority of women to men, with transgender men not being seen as a ‘threat’ in the way transgender women are. Moreover, there has been little research on transgender athletes within the context of team sports. While a portion of the literature focuses on individual transgender athletes in a team setting, such as swimmer Lia Thomas who competes individually on a team, there is limited literature pertaining to transgender athletes on a cohesive team. In this

regard, there are interesting questions that need to be addressed. For example, how would a transgender athlete on a hockey or baseball team impact the success of the whole team?

Moreover, while the focus is often on elite athletes, there are significant gaps in the literature when it comes to recreational or intramural athletes who do not compete at high levels. This gap presents a further area in which meaningful research can be done, and starts a new dialogue when it comes to fair play. To elaborate, is fair play applicable to collegiate intramurals, house league clubs, or little league baseball? At which level is this still a discussion or will it always be? While the literature is limited, it is complex in its nature, and the various gaps that have emerged present new and exciting fields or research pertaining to the topic that are left to be explored.

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