

US: Trans athletes are posting victories and shaking up sports

Transgender athletes at all levels of sport are winning medals, spurring a contentious debate over the future of gendered competition.

By Christie Aschwanden

WIRED (29.10.2019) – <https://bit.ly/34D0dWf> – Transgender athletes are having a moment. At all levels of sport, they're stepping onto the podium and into the headlines. New Zealand weightlifter Laurel Hubbard won two gold medals at the Pacific Games, and college senior CeCé Telfer became the US National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II national champion in the 400-meter run. Another senior, June Eastwood, has been instrumental to her cross-country team's success. At the high school level, Terry Miller won the girls' 200-meter dash at Connecticut's state open championship track meet.

These recent performances are inherently praiseworthy—shining examples of what humans can accomplish with training and effort. But as more transgender athletes rise to the top of their fields, some vocal opponents are also expressing outrage at what they see as transgender athletes ruining sports for cisgendered girls and women.

These issues have come to a head in Connecticut, where a

conservative Christian group called Alliance Defending Freedom has filed a legal complaint on behalf of three high school athletes who are seeking to bar transgender girls from competing in the girls category. In Connecticut, as in more than a dozen other states, high school athletes are allowed to compete in the category that matches their gender identity. According to ADF legal counsel Christiana Holcomb, two transgender athletes—Miller and another runner, Andraya Yearwood—“have amassed 15 different state championship titles that were once held by nine different girls across the state.” The US Department of Education’s office for civil rights is now investigating the group’s complaint.

Nowhere are the debates around transgender rights as stark as they are in sports, where the temptation to draw a hard biological line has run up against the limits of what science can offer. The outcome, at least so far, is an inconsistent mix of rules that leaves almost nothing resolved.

In the NCAA, for example, transgender women can compete on women’s teams after they’ve completed one year of testosterone suppression treatment. But the organization doesn’t place limits on what a transgender athlete’s testosterone levels can be. The International Olympic Committee has more granular rules: Transgender women can compete in the women’s category as long as their blood testosterone levels have been maintained below 10 nano moles per liter for a minimum of 12 months. Cisgender men typically have testosterone levels of 7.7 to 29.4 nano moles per liter, while premenopausal cis women are generally 1.7 nmol/L or less. Meanwhile, the governing body of track and field just adopted a 5nmol/L limit.

So which approach is most fair? “Fair is a very subjective word,” says Joanna Harper, a transgender woman, distance runner, and researcher who served on the IOC committee that developed that organization’s current rules. It boils down to whom you’re trying to be fair to, Harper says. “To billions of typical women who cannot compete with men at high levels of sport?” Or “a very repressed minority in transgender people who only want to enjoy the same things that everybody else does, including participation in sports?”

Transgender women’s performances generally decline as their testosterone does. But not every male advantage dissipates when testosterone drops. Some advantages, such as their bigger bone structure, greater lung capacity, and larger heart size remain, says Alison Heather, a physiologist at the University of Otago in New Zealand. Testosterone also promotes muscle memory—an ability to regain muscle mass after a period of detraining—by increasing the number of nuclei in muscles, and these added nuclei don’t go away. So transgender women have a heightened ability to build strength even after they transition, Heather says.

One way to address these issues, Heather and her colleagues wrote in an essay published in the Journal of Medical Ethics, would be to create a handicap system that uses an algorithm to account for physiological parameters such as testosterone, hemoglobin levels, height, and endurance capacity, as well as social factors like gender identity and socioeconomic status. “Such an algorithm would be analogous to the divisions in the Paralympics, and may also include paralympians,” they write. Instead of two divisions, male and female, there would be multiple ones and “athletes would be placed into a division which best mitigates unfair physical and social parameters.” The algorithm would need to be sport-specific, and Heather and

her colleagues acknowledge that producing it would be a difficult task.

Another approach would be to create a third category for people who don't fit neatly into the male/female dichotomy (including intersex people, who are born with a mix of male and female traits). Although this might sound like a simple solution, Harper says that "As a transgender person myself, I don't want to compete in a third category, which many people would see as a freak category." It could also limit opportunities for transgender athletes if there are not enough of them to fill out a team or category.

For all the hand-wringing about transgender women ruining women's sport, so far there's little evidence of that happening. Although CeCé Telfer and June Eastwood garnered attention for their outstanding performances on women's collegiate running teams, they are hardly the only transgender athletes in the NCAA. Helen Carroll is a LGBTQ sports advocate who worked on the NCAA transgender handbook. Through her advocacy work, she has interacted extensively with transgender athletes and she estimates there are somewhere in the neighborhood of 150 to 200 transgender athletes currently competing in NCAA sports. Most of them "you don't hear a thing about," she says, because their participation hasn't caused controversy.

Sport can be a life-saver for transgender people, who are at high risk of suicide, Carroll says. "They've been fighting themselves and feeling like they were in the wrong body, and sport gives them a place to be happy about their body and what it can do."

Where to draw the line between inclusiveness for transgender athletes and fairness for cis ones is an ethical question that ultimately requires value judgements that can only be informed, not decided, by science. Even basic notions of a level playing field aren't easy to codify. Which means that at some point the question of who is a woman becomes a cultural inquiry: How athletically outstanding can a girl or woman be before we no longer see her as female?