“Stepping Up” for Trans Inclusion in Sport

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Backlash against transgender (trans) people has notably extended into sport. Over the past two years, an unprecedented number of sport organizations have banned trans girls and women from competitions. Scholars from across disciplines have highlighted the problems with these prohibitions; yet, a look through the pages of our journals and our conference proceedings shows the invisibility of trans people in our field, as both actors and authors. As Sport History Review Editor Carly Adams points out in her 2022 editorial “‘Home’ to Some, But Not to Others: It’s Time to ‘Step Up,’” much of the work published in our field “continues to value and privilege certain bodies, voices, and analytic foci.” We have largely ignored the experiences and perspectives of trans people.

I am responding to Adams’s call for sport historians to “step up” by encouraging us to be more encompassing and inclusive of trans voices. In doing so, I echo sport historian CB Lucas’s call for us to “bring trans and queer perspectives into our work” to recognize “the ways that queerness (in its myriad forms) pushes against, cracks open, and flat out refuses the binary logics of gender.” Political fear mongering and reductive understandings of sex have cleaved the rights of trans individuals. Our ability to provide historical context to inform contemporary conversations is, therefore, more imperative than ever. As scholars Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici poignantly argue, “History often lends legitimacy to a community’s claim that it belongs in the here and now.” We have work to do to ensure that sport history is a space for trans people.

In writing this response, I acknowledge my positionality affords me power. Transfeminist methodologies encourage scholars to interrogate their identities and motivations when studying topics related to trans figures to recognize “unequal power dynamics within the research process.” As a White, United States, able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender (cis) scholar, I have navigated both higher education and sports with relative ease. It is unlikely that I will face backlash—personal or professional—for writing this response. I, therefore, hope to use this privilege to offer some thoughts on how we can “step up” for trans inclusion in sport history. First, I offer responses to some of the obstacles historians encounter in studying trans history, then I use my own scholarship to provide examples of “cissexist pitfalls” to avoid.

Some sport historians may suggest that the invisibility of trans figures in our scholarship stems from the contemporaneous nature of the term “transgender.” It is
true that the word only emerged in the mid-twentieth century, “and thus no one before that time could explicitly self-identify as such.” Historians have, therefore, rightfully cautioned about retroactively applying the term to historical figures. To do so potentially diminishes their agency and risks “divesting past gender practice(s) of what made it meaningful in its own time and place.” Moreover, modern understandings of what it means to be transgender are rooted in White, Western identities, flattening nuances into a singular umbrella term. As scholar C. Riley Snorton asks, “What pasts have been submerged and discarded to solidify—or, more precisely, indemnify—a set of procedures that would render blackness and transness as distinct categories of social valuation?” Increasing the visibility of trans people can offer legitimacy to some, but it also runs the risk of erasing others. Yet, in many ways, trans experiences are not confined to the present. Historian Susan Stryker uses the term “transgender” to “refer to people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth.” She adds that “it is the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place, rather than any particular destination or mode of transition—that best characterizes the concept of ‘transgender.’” Such broad understandings can help sport historians identify and include people in the past who align with this definition, even if they did not label themselves as such.

Some may further note the difficulty in locating trans voices, perspectives, and experiences in source materials. Indeed, writes historian Emily Skidmore, “Any sort of marginalized population has had a hard time finding their sources present in traditional archives.” When artifacts or documents do exist, they often come from the perspective of cis people—typically in legal, medical, or newspaper archives—and lack trans individuals’ agency or subjectivity. This, of course, is also true of sources in sport history. As sport historian Gary Osmond explains, “A dearth of historic sources has stymied sport historians in their ability to examine the queer sporting past.” Yet, he also notes that this scarcity does not stem from the absence of LGBTQI+ figures “but from their general invisibility until recent decades.” Osmond and other historians have, therefore, found innovative ways to locate LGBTQQ+ voices, perspectives, and experiences in the past, including assessments of social media platforms, personal archives, poetry, song lyrics, and oral traditions. Following these examples, and echoing Adams’s call, sport historians must “take up the failure of our field [and] think outside of conventional ways of knowing” to expand LGBTQI+ sport history.

But cis sport historians hoping to “push the boundaries of our sport work” must also do so in a way that does not perpetuate cissexism. Adams’s editorial encouraged me to reconsider my own writings in trans sport history and reflect on how I reproduced cis normativity. I wrote a master’s thesis, peer-reviewed article, and two book chapters on Renée Richards, a trans woman who competed in the U.S. Open in 1977. My publications collectively argue that Richards’s embodiment of conventional White femininity and fight for inclusion into women’s tennis reaffirmed binary understandings of sex and gender in sport. When applying what sociologist Austin H. Johnson identifies as “cissexist analytical pitfalls,” it is clear that my work perpetuates cissexism in several ways.

First, Johnson defines “ciscentricity” as the “reconstruction of the social from a cisgender perspective.” This pitfall allows cis identity to operate as the unspoken norm. Similar to the ways in which Whiteness often operates as an invisible race,
cisgender identity is frequently written as universal and normative. In my works on Richards, I identified her as a “transgender woman” without similarly identifying her cis advocates and opponents as cisgender. I did not mark cis tennis players like Chris Evert and Billie Jean King as cis. By not naming cisgender as a gender identity, I rendered trans identity as “subordinate, marginal, and extraordinary.”

Second, “cissexist double standard” occurs when scholars interrogate the actions, behaviors, and decisions of trans individuals but not the actions, behaviors, and decisions of cis individuals. In other words, they hold trans individuals to different expectations. Sport scholar Mustafa Şahin Karaçam rightfully points out that sport studies scholars frequently “[offer] critiques of trans women for reinforcing the gender binary” without indicting cis women for doing the same thing. He adds that “it is not just trans people who ‘reproduce’ ideas about sex and gender but everyone.” In my own works, I criticized Richards’s demonstration of conventional femininity and analyzed her role in maintaining the gender status quo in sport without assessing the actions, appearances, or performances of her cis opponents. As perhaps the most illustrative example of the cissexist double standard in my work, I denounced Richards’s later-in-life stance against trans athlete inclusion yet failed to interrogate others who held similar positions, including Martina Navratilova. As Karaçam correctly notes, “Being a trans woman does not prevent one from expressing rhetoric that is harmful to some trans women.”

Third, “objectification” is when scholars use trans people to make larger points. Borrowing from scholar Julia Serano, Johnson suggests that this falls into two categories: “radical gender rebels” or “assimilationist gender conformists.” Scholars deploy the rebel trope to refute biological determinism and support gender performativity; scholars deploy the conformist trope as evidence of the power of gender hegemony. The latter positions trans people as “reinforcing the myth of gender through their willingness to change their bodies.” I am guilty of using the reinforcement trope. In 2010, I wrote that “Richards’s story serves as a valuable case study illustrating the importance of gender segregation in sport.” Seven years later, I, again, argued that “Richards’s athletic career demonstrates the importance of gender norms in the determination of sex in women’s tennis.” In flattening Richards into a type, I diminished her agency and ability to define herself.

Finally, Johnson identifies the tendency of scholars to overgeneralize the lived experiences of trans individuals. Researchers often depict trans people as a homogenous group: as White, middle class, and from the Global North. I, too, failed to interrogate the ways in which Richards’s positionality shaped her experiences and views, allowing her Whiteness and wealth to go unexamined. In doing so, I contributed to the erasure of the “multiplicity of lived experiences of transgender people.”

I offer critiques of my own work not to absolve myself of past errors. As scholars, we all must continue to grow and evolve. This involves questioning our past practices and interrogating our methods of knowing. In assessing my own scholarship and identifying its limitations, I hope to help create the space Adams calls for in her editorial. It is a harrowing time for trans people inside and outside of sport. The need for trans inclusion in sport history is, therefore, more pressing than ever.
Notes

1. World Rugby became the first international federation to institute a complete ban in elite competition in 2020. Other federations, including the International Cycling Union, International Swimming Federation, International Tennis Federation, World Rowing, and World Triathlon enacted prohibitive testosterone requirements. In the United States, lawmakers have targeted trans athletes in school sport. As of April 2022, U.S. lawmakers in forty-one states introduced over one hundred bills to prohibit trans students from participating in sport consistent with their gender identity.


16. Ibid., 27.

17. Mustafa Karaçam, “A History of Debates over Trans Women’s Inclusion in Elite Sport and Trans Athlete Activism in Canada” (PhD Thesis, Queen’s University, 2022), 96.

(Ahead of Print)
18. Ibid., 95.