Gender Discrimination in Sport in the 21st Century: A Commentary on Trans-Athlete Exclusion in Canada from a Sociohistorical Perspective

Sarah Teetzel  Charlene Weaving
University of Manitoba  St. Francis Xavier University

“[An amateur] has never competed in any open competition or for public money, or for admission money, or with professionals for a prize, public money or admission money, nor has ever at any period of his life taught or assisted in the pursuit of Athletic exercises as a means of livelihood or is a laborer or an Indian.”1 (1873)

“[H]arassment and discrimination based on sex, and sexual orientation . . . are prohibited.”2 (2015)

A thorough understanding of the past can provide explanations for why change is so difficult and slow in sport. While recognizing that history does not evolve in a straight line, and single events and institutions are not representative of the whole, past examples of exclusion and discrimination in sport are helpful in identifying how and why the exclusion of transgender3 athletes in sport remains today. Marginalization in sport is highly complex, involving multiple power systems and players. Many Canadian recreational and elite athletes continue to struggle for opportunity and acceptance in sport. This is especially evident with the case of trans athletes in the 21st century. The lack of inclusive policies for trans athletes has resulted in discrimination, exclusion, and harassment.

At present, Canada lacks a nationwide policy regarding the inclusion of trans athletes in sport. In examining trans inclusion policies that do exist and are currently in effect at various levels of Canadian sport and in different provinces, this commentary examines some of the historical roots and barriers to inclusive sport in Canada. Inspired by Don Morrow’s work, which has drawn on multiple fields and bodies of literature (specifically, his examination of femininity ideals,4 masculinity ideals,5 and amateurism6), we argue that to understand both the delays and

---

Teetzel is with the Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB, Canada. Weaving is with the Dept. of Human Kinetics, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS, Canada. Please address author correspondence to Sarah Teetzel at sarah.teetzel@umanitoba.ca
progress made to date in making sport a safe and inclusive space for people who identify as trans, it is important to understand and appreciate the historical origins of our current sport system. Using key moments in Canadian sport history as examples, we argue that the lack of a fair and consistently applied nationwide trans athlete inclusion policy in Canada condones gender identity–based exclusion in sport.

To better understand this divisive issue in contemporary sport, individuals and organizations seeking to develop trans sport policy would benefit from contextualization derived from the fields of sociology, philosophy, law, psychology, gender studies, political science, and the biological sciences, including the writings of Canadian sport historian Don Morrow, whose work has greatly influenced our own understanding of sociocultural sport research. As former students of Don’s, we look to trace the connection with past work examining Canadian sport policy development to contextualize the historical delays and progress to date in making sport an inclusive space in Canada. This commentary reviews the status of trans inclusion policies in effect in Canada. Yet, before we do so, we will contextualize the terms trans, gender, and sex.

While researchers often use the term gender in reference to identity (self or social), they commonly use sex to refer to an individual’s biological attributes. These simplified understandings, while commonly applied, fail to highlight that both sex and gender are socially constructed categories. For athletes who identify as trans (i.e., people who identify with the gender that is different from the sex assigned to them at birth), the feeling that their assigned gender does not align with their perceived sense of self may or may not lead them to seek medical interventions in order to transition. People who identify as trans may, or may not, actively pursue and participate in changing their physical appearance. The problematic way in which medicine and culture tend to view any form of gender nonconformity is a core issue affecting all individuals who identify as trans.

Contemporary sources examining the history of women’s sport, and the policing of women’s events, demonstrate the numerous ways in which some sports organizations have subjected, and continue to subject, some athletes to damaging and sometimes unwanted elective surgeries aimed at forcing “sex-typical” appearances and behaviors in the name of correction. As many scholars have shown, whether based on anatomy, chromosomes, or testosterone level, the policing of women athletes’ bodies functions to discriminate against women who do not subscribe to conventional notions of white, Western femininity, and compulsory heterosexuality. Several scholars, for example, have argued that the methods used to enforce gender verification are inherently unfair, enforce heterosexist ideals, and violate an athlete’s dignity.

Respecting athletes’ autonomy and right to privacy can clash with attempts to secure a level playing field and ensure no one is competing with an unfair advantage. However, physiological differences between women and men are averages, not categories or absolutes; they do not define a person as male or female and therefore should not be used to form policy. Research regarding physiological differences between males and females based on testosterone levels is thus far inconclusive, and further research in this area is needed to ensure that sport policy treats fairly people who deviate from the traditional gender binary.