What is the T in LGBT? Supporting Transgender Athletes Through Sport Psychology

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Being an out trans-athlete I’ve learned that you have to [be] mentally tougher than all of your competitors, and willing to sacrifice more and work harder to accomplish the same thing as your competitors. I guess that should make my accomplishments mean even more to me but I find it to be a double edged sword in that my accomplishments do mean something but I work and drive myself into the ground mentally and physically for track, and yet I am still seen as a nobody in track and field not because I can’t throw but because I’m trans. There are days where I wonder if it is worth [it] since being an elite athlete you sacrifice your life no matter your identity but when for me I closet my identity again. I continue to live in skin I can’t even look at in the mirror to throw [sic]. People have asked me if it is worth it or why I sacrifice my identity. That answer is relatively simple. I love to throw.

...I decided to not transition so I could graduate doing everything I wanted to accomplish. Once I graduated and I had two years before the next Olympic trials, I started working with a great coach and knew I had a chance and I just couldn’t give up on that shot of possibly making the Olympic team… When I made the decision I made it for my love of sport, and the sport I have dedicated my whole life for. I ruined relationships and lost friendships as well as lost my identity all for track. ...I wish there was a feasible way to be me and be an athlete all at the same time but I don’t see there being a chance, especially being able to compete at the same level I am competing at. I’ve lost who I am, I can only see a woman when I am even at my best of passing, despite only feeling like a man. I did this all to compete to be the best at something and accomplish something not many people trans or non trans can say they have accomplished. (Corbyn, 2009, ¶ 2)
Corbyn describes himself as “an out FTM1 elite athlete. I am pre-hormones, pre-surgery in order for me to continue competing as a woman” (Corbyn, 2009). While his experiences are not representative of all transgender athletes’ experiences, they certainly speak to the turbulent terrain transgender athletes navigate in the United States. As evidenced by the recent public openness of Kye Allums, a transgender man competing on a women’s college basketball team (Zeigler, 2010a), the increasing visibility of transgender athletes and athletes with transgender histories implores the attention of sport scholars. Yet, the field of sport psychology, as well as individual consultants, is unlikely to be prepared to work with athletes with alternative gender identities. Dialogue about gender identity and transgender athletes in sport psychology is nearly nonexistent. In their review of the history of research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues in sport psychology, Krane, Waldron, Kauer, and Semerjian (2010) found no articles focused on transgender athletes. Instead, transgender athletes tend to be lumped in with other sexual minorities under the LGBT umbrella. While there are some common experiences among LGBT individuals, issues surrounding gender identity differ from those related to sexual orientation. In sport psychology, our lack of attention to gender identity and the gaping holes in our literature and education programs leaves the field wholly unprepared to provide compassionate, competent, and appropriate services for transgender athletes. Further, children as young as six years old are recognizing their nonconforming gender status (Rosin, 2008) and by middle school students are identifying as transgender (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006). Needless to say, it won’t be long before open and proud transgender youth become more visible in sport. Scholars such as Jodi Cohen (2007) recognize that there are trans athletes competing at all levels of sport, “though most remain hidden and silenced” (p. 1).

The presence of transgender athletes in sport compels questioning many hegemonic beliefs and practices. For example, as an institution, sport constructs and reinforces perceptions of natural differences between males and females that long have influenced the allocation of resources, status, and privileges conferred upon male and female athletes (Messner, 2002). That is, sport reinforces the notion that innate differences exist between the sexes (Travers, 2006), such as males are larger and stronger and hence better athletes than females. Females are perceived as more graceful and flexible and better suited to excel at different sports than males (Choi, 2000; Messner, 2002). The customary gender segregation of most sport settings, often beginning at an early age, reinforces the notion that boys and girls, women and men, are essentially different from one another (Messner). These beliefs and practices are grounded in a binary categorization of sex. This binary assumes that females and males are categorically different and that individuals are either male or female (Kane, 1995; Theberge, 1998). Individuals falling somewhere between these dichotomous categories often face social repercussions and discrimination in sport (Krane, 2008). Strict adherence to this binary has resulted in the erasure and stigmatization of transgender individuals (Cavanaugh & Sykes, 2006; Teetzel, 2006). Yet, transgender athletes do exist and they are competing on sport teams or could be joining teams if sport were more welcoming and accepting. Sport psychologists should be at the forefront of creating safe and receptive climates for gender nonconforming athletes.

The purpose of this article is to provide a starting place for sport psychologists eager to learn more about working with transgender athletes and their teammates