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Beginning to Understand the Sport Experience of High Performance Female Transgender Athletes in Canada

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How to ensure that female transgender athletes compete fairly and equitably is a complex and polarizing issue that continually stirs controversy, misunderstanding, and heated debate.

A basic first step is understanding that “a transgender person is one whose gender identity or biological sex is outside of the male-female binary system, who does not identify with his/her sex assigned at birth, or who has begun a transition to better match gender expression and gender identity.”

In describing the sport environment, Jennifer Birch Jones has written: “[Trans] athletes are born as biological males, but at some point in time have realized that their gender identity is female and have transitioned to living their lives fully as women. The debate around participation by trans women athletes in high performance sport ... is reflective of the societal changes where more people are choosing to live their lives in the gender in which they identify.”

Ensuring fairness and inclusion and welcoming diversity are challenges for everyone within the Canadian sport system. This article by Camille Michon and Guylaine Demers brings much-needed clarity to the transgender discussion. - Sheila Robertson, *Journal* editor

https://www.caaws.ca/e/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/2018_Media_Guide_for_Athletes.pdf

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Beginning to Understand the Sport Experience of High Performance Female Transgender Athletes in Canada

By Camille Michon and Guylaine Demers

In Canada, studies on the sport experience of transgender athletes are scarce, and this is especially the case within the high performance arena. To shed light on this topic, we interviewed three female transgender athletes.¹ Each has competed at the national, international, or professional level in three different sports,

¹ This article stems from a master's thesis by Camille Michon (2019) entitled *Enquête sur l'expérience sportive des athlètes collégiaux et universitaires canadiens - Portrait des expériences sportives des athlètes transgenres*. This project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

each with its own culture. While their respective sport backgrounds differ considerably, all three share similarities that help us to better understand the sport experiences of transgender athletes, whether before, during, or after their transition. These sport experiences provide guidance regarding what should be considered to make sport more inclusive and open to diversity, particularly with respect to transgender women at all levels of competition. Our aim is to give a voice to these athletes in order to promote greater awareness of their reality within the sport community, in particular among coaches. We want coaches to have a better understanding of the transgender athletes' sporting experience. We also want to equip coaches to work with transgender athletes and to educate their own athletes about the importance of allowing transgender athletes to compete at all levels of competition.

What the female transgender athletes told us about their sport experiences

When to transition to transgender

Fundamentally, being transgender and discovering that your identity does not match the gender assigned to you at birth brings its share of challenges and difficulties. In the case of the three athletes we interviewed, each was aware of being transgender starting from their teen years, yet they only began their transition in adulthood. Social context was the main reason for waiting to make the transition. As teenagers, the athletes found themselves in sport environments that displayed little openness to diversity, an experience that did not encourage them to start the transition at this time in their lives. Their need to continue in their sport was stronger than their need to assert themselves as transgender. In young adulthood, having moved on to a different environment than that of their teen years, two decided to make the transition while staying active in their sport. The third preferred to undergo a complete transition before returning.

Stay in sport? Yes, but with restrictions.

From their inception, sports have been designed and developed around two mutually exclusive categories: men on one side and women on the other. How can a transgender athlete be made to feel welcome in this binary system? A respectful answer for the athlete would be: by including them in the gender category with which they identify. But the real answer is not so simple. The eligibility of transgender men — that is, women who transition to the male gender — to compete against men is rarely challenged. In this situation, according to the latest recommendations of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) pertaining to gender reassignment,¹ as soon as a transgender man identifies as such, he may take part in competitions in the male category without having to meet any special requirements. However, for transgender women — men who transition to the female gender — the IOC has inclusion requirements: the athlete needs to have declared the new gender identity (being a woman) at least four years prior and has to undergo hormonal treatment to regulate testosterone levels. That is, 12 months before their first competition, they must have less than 10 nanomoles per litre of blood.

Although the three athletes had to comply with the above requirements before competing, such restrictive measures did not curb their ambitions; all three persevered in their respective sports. Moreover, none suffered reprisals from male or female teammates (for coed sports) or from opponents. Only one was identified with her former gender by an event organizer, but the situation was rapidly resolved. It would appear that female transgender athletes are able to pursue their sport freely so long as they submit to the measures imposed on them. However, we cannot generalize this to all transgender athletes and all sports, since our findings derive from the experiences of only three athletes.

Sports as a medium of affirmation and integration for transgender athletes

The three transgender athletes clearly identified sport as playing a particularly important role in their lives in several respects. First, all are high performers in their sports, and their sport participation is a priority in their lives. Most high-performing athletes report that reaching the highest levels of their sport requires total dedication, and transgender athletes are no exception. For these three, sport has always been associated with success and affirmation. Throughout their lives, their sport experiences has boosted their self-confidence. This is one of the most important elements for transgender people, given that their need for recognition and social acceptance is decisive in the transition process. Moreover, the psychological health benefits of physical activity must not be ignored, especially in light of recent statistics showing that one-

third of transgender youths have attempted suicide.ⁱⁱ All three mentioned sport as a key pillar in their lives, especially during adolescence. This demonstrates the powerful role sports can play in helping transgender youths adopt healthy long-term behaviours, increase their self-confidence and validation, and maintain psychological balance, which can be fragile after discovering a transgender identity. This need to play sports to maintain a psychological balance surfaced several times during the interviews. Indeed, the practice of their sport corresponded to the times when they felt particularly good, compared to the torments experienced outside the sport. The outlet offered by the practice of sport became a safe place where it was possible to take refuge and where the transgender athletes had access to a real feeling of well-being. In itself, each recommended the practice of a sport or physical activity to anyone living a transition simply for producing the state of mind in which physical expenditure can thrive and for the access to the feeling of tranquility produced momentarily by the sport.

Sports with little openness to diversity

Although sport has its share of positive impacts in the lives of participants, the transgender athletes we interviewed have not had an easy or linear journey in sport. All three changed sports as a result of unpleasant situations or a lack of regard in the sport they initially chose. For two of the three, the decision to leave the initial sport is explained by the coach's behaviour. In the first situation, it was the LGBT-phobic comments made by the coach that tarnished the sporting experience. Evolving within a sporting context in which she did not feel fully respected progressively detached her from her sport to focus on another sport. The second athlete decided to leave her sport as a teenager after noticing that her teammates' comments and values made her sporting environment harmful. Her coach questioned her on the subject, but did not enact any concrete actions to change this culture. The abandonment of the sport, despite the talent of this athlete, was the solution to which she turned.

Safety was often mentioned as a concern during the interviews; the athletes seemed to look for communities where they could assert their gender identity without feeling afraid. They told us that during young adulthood, the need to assert themselves took precedence over participation in their sport. However, since sport continued to be a core part of their identities, the need inevitably arose to find a solution. This led them in the direction of sports with greater openness to diversity that would enable them to find greater fulfilment as a transgender person.

Never underestimate the value of a support network.

For transgender people in general, being able to count on a support network is one element that facilitates acceptance during the transition process. Indeed, it is commonplace for anyone who has been actively involved in sport to describe their sport environment as a second family. Accordingly, the acceptance and openness of team members — teammates and leaders alike — are decisive in transgender athletes' sport experience. As mentioned during the interviews, feeling welcome and respected in their sport environment largely contributed to their personal and professional fulfilment in sport. The role of the coach in establishing this diverse and welcoming sporting environment for transgender athletes is very important. (We provide avenues for coaches' interventions at the end of the article.)

All three openly identify as transgender in their communities, as they perceive their network to be safe, open, and welcoming. One revealed that the significant openness of those in her sport environment was a factor in her decision to embrace the cause and become a transgender advocate in her sport. The fact that no one around them questions their eligibility to participate substantially contributes to strengthening and maintaining their sense of belonging in their sport environment.

A need for education: We judge what we don't know.

According to the three, education is one of the best tools for deconstructing certain beliefs and consequently facilitating transgender athletes' integration into all levels of sport participation, from community to competitive. Few people are familiar with the realities of transgender individuals, or consider everything transition entails from a personal and relational standpoint. A lack of information is one of the greatest barriers to the inclusion of transgender athletes, whether in terms of a basic misunderstanding of the situation or a lack of sensitivity. This is a primary reason why many transgender athletes across the world, and particularly in North America, become public role models in various sport contexts. Two out of the three decided to play a leading role in their sport by openly identifying as transgender in order to educate those around them about the realities transgender athletes face and to share their sport experience. In addition, the three also highlighted the need to spread this information to everyone involved in the Canadian sport system through education specifically designed for coaches, athletes, and parents. The ultimate goal is to reach all stakeholders across the sport community to ensure everyone is adequately educated about transgender integration.

What coaches should consider to facilitate a transgender athlete's integration

To reiterate, it is important to keep in mind that each transgender athlete is different. Therefore, as a coach, show openness by accepting any athlete identifying as transgender and helping her along her journey while respecting her process. Secondly, get information from both the transgender athlete and her sport organization in order to provide a training and competition environment that will meet her needs. Next, communicate this information within her sport environment. The process of educating other coaches, support personnel, teammates, and parents is an important step in establishing a safe and healthy environment for sport participation. The last step may seem obvious, but it is one of the most important. Enable the athlete to develop full athletic potential by providing the best possible training and competitive opportunities. This last point applies to all athletes, but is especially important for transgender athletes. If sport provides an outlet, a support network, and self-confidence, then coaches play a key role in creating that positive sport experience.

Helpful resources

Various resources are available to help coaches fulfill this role, such as the guide developed by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES)ⁱⁱⁱ to support sport organizations in developing their inclusion policies. Another is TransAthlete,^{iv} an online resource created by transgender athlete Chris Mosier that helps foster an understanding of transgender athletes' sport experience, explores various sport inclusion policies as they are updated around the world, and develops the roles and expectations associated with transgender allies. The aim of these resources is to empower all sport stakeholders to become allies of the cause, keeping in mind that the purpose of this article is to insist that everyone is entitled to a positive sport experience.

The role of the coach in supporting a transgender athlete

Both inside and outside the sporting environment, it must be kept in mind that each transgender person lives uniquely. Thus, not all transgender people resort to hormonal or surgical interventions. For some, simply being recognized by the gender with which they identify is sufficient in their personal process. Others will begin hormonal treatment, since the changes resulting from this process allow them to modify their body in a way to get closer to the gender with which they identify. Finally, surgical procedures may be a preferred option for some transgender people to change their genital anatomy, facial features, vocal folds, and other features that refer to their previous gender. All these operations require, for the most part, convalescence and significant expenses not covered by medical insurance. In addition, for any hormonal or surgical treatment, several meetings with specialists such as psychologists, psychiatrists, endocrinologists, surgeons who specialize in sexual reassignment, and plastic surgeons are mandatory with letters of support certifying that the transitional process is well-founded and permanent for the transgender person. These medical appointments are in themselves laborious and can extend over a long period. Consequently, a transgender person may choose not to use surgeries or hormonal treatment. It is therefore important to understand that the transition process varies from one person to another; it is essential to respect the choices the transgender person makes in her journey. At the end of the day, transgender people must feel good about themselves, regardless of the decisions they make about the transition process, because these decisions are intensely personal.

Various situations may arise when an athlete comes out to a coach as a transgender:

- The coming out of the athlete in her sporting environment is personal and differs from one person to another. If the transgender athlete has confided in her coach about her gender identity, the coach should ask what approach to take with other members of the team or within the sporting environment. While it is essential to refer to the athlete by the gender with which she identifies, it is even more important to respect the moment when she chooses to identify herself as transgender in her sporting context. Whether by telling teammates, stakeholders or, more publicly, by announcing it to everyone, coming out remains a very personal step by the athlete and it is important to respect the pace. Not all transgender athletes want to be identified as such nor want to be role models in their sport. The decision varies from one athlete to another so ask before acting.
- The choice to opt for a hormonal transition is personal for every transgender person. However, in the case of female transgender athletes who wish to continue their athletic careers at the high performance level following transition, the hormone treatment process is unavoidable due to the IOC regulations. For recreational athletes, there is no need for a hormonal transition as U Sports new policies stipulate. It goes without saying that the hormonal treatment, when started, will have to be supported throughout the life of the athlete. The physical and physiological changes caused by hormone therapy are, for the most part, irreversible. The decision to undertake this type of treatment must come after thorough reflection on the part of the athlete.
- As with the hormonal transition, the choice to opt for a surgical transition varies from person to person mainly because the changes are significant, permanent, and can be very expensive. In order to get closer to their ideal and to feel good about themselves, some athletes will use mammoplasty and vaginoplasty in order to feel more comfortable in their body and more comfortable in the women's locker room. This is the case of one of the athletes interviewed who decided to return to her sport once her physical transition was complete. In a sporting context, providing a neutral dressing room or a place to respect the intimacy of the transgender athlete may be a solution.
- It is important to respect the pace of the athlete in her transition to her new gender identity. Being in the sporting context, coaches know that a priority is to develop the full potential of their athletes. Coaches also understand that for the majority of top athletes, sport is at the centre of their lives. That being said, when a transgender athlete decides to begin the transition, it is possible that her priority is primarily focused on her need to affirm her gender identity and that the sport becomes secondary for a period of time in her life. Sport is no less important than before, but elements related to the transition take a sizeable chunk of her daily life and it is possible that the time and the energy invested in the sport lessen. As a coach, it is important to respect the athlete's capabilities and to understand that the changes being experienced are major. Like any athlete experiencing personal upheaval, a transgender athlete needs to know that she can count on her coach at any time and that the coach will always be open to meeting her needs.

Guidelines to adapting the training environment

- Use the right pronouns. From the moment the athlete expresses her transgender identity and wants to be identified with the pronouns that represent her, coaches should set an example by using appropriate vocabulary in front of other athletes and coaches. This demonstration of respect is a first sign of confidence the coach can demonstrate to her athlete. Establishing this link is essential for the athlete to feel included in her sporting environment.
- Adapt the intensity and frequency of training sessions according to the physiological and physical changes of the athlete. It is important to mention that hormonal treatment has repercussions on the physical abilities of the athlete. In training, it is necessary to adjust to the actual capabilities of the athlete, rather than constantly rely on past performances. Some athletes mentioned that they perceived a distinct difference in their capabilities due to the use of hormones. These repercussions vary from one athlete to another, hence the importance of being sensitive, as a coach, to the performance of the transgender athlete during the transition to help her perform at the best of her current capabilities. In addition, surgical procedures require convalescence to allow the

athlete to regain optimal physical capabilities. An adaptation of the training sessions is necessary in order to give the body time to recover its strength before once again over-stressing the muscles.

- Adapt interventions to all members of the team by respecting the time needed for each of them to understand the new identity of a teammate. It is important to note that the announcement of the presence of a transgender person within a team has repercussions on all of its members. Whether accepting, understanding, or merely digesting the news, everyone around and on the team can take variable time before being comfortable; this is completely legitimate. Think of a team that has been evolving together since childhood when overnight, one athlete assumes a new gender identity; accepting the simple change of a first name can be a challenge. It is therefore essential to be surrounded by specialists and resources that enable team members to understand the situation and make progress in their reflections on the news. The athletes we met mentioned that when there is resistance to the presence of transgender athletes, it is often linked to a misunderstanding of what a transgender person is. The coach can thus serve as a link between the members of her team and the resources best adapted to the situation in order to welcome the news with the most sensitivity possible.

Finally, it is essential to remember that we are talking about human beings. These people have lived or are currently living through extremely difficult moments. Our coaching goes well beyond the athletic performance of our athletes. We constantly support them through various stages of their lives, and the transition to a new gender identity is probably one of the most difficult. We hope this article will help coaches to support the transgender athletes who cross their path in order to contribute to developing tomorrow's citizens by being open to differences.

About the Authors

Camille Michon holds a bachelor's degree in physical and health education and is currently studying for a psychopedagogy master's degree in the Department of Physical Education at Laval University. She has a strong interest in researching women and sport. For the past two years, she has been collaborating on a research project that concerns Canadian athletes' sporting experiences around LGBT-phobia issues. She is also working as a research assistant for the women studies research chair at Laval University.

Guylaine Demers is a professor at Laval University. She takes particular interest in issues of women in sport and LGBT-phobia in sport. She is the Chair of Egale Action. Guylaine made the CAAWS list of Most Influential Women in 2007, 2010, and 2015. In november 2017, she was named the women's studies research chair at Laval University. Until recently, she was the appointed Chair of the Women and Sport Working Group set up by Minister Kirsty Duncan at the federal level. One of her achievements was the organization of Conversation 2015 dedicated to fostering solutions to bettering the experiences of women in the Canadian sport system (www.SolutionsWomenSport.ca) (https://www.coach.ca/files/CJWC_OCTOBER2015_EN.pdf). She is organizing another Conversation in June 2020.

ⁱ International Olympic Committee (2015). *IOC Consensus Meeting on Sex Reassignment and Hyperandrogenism*. URL: https://stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/Commissions_PDFfiles/Medical_commission/2015-11_ioc_consensus_meeting_on_sex_reassignment_and_hyperandrogenism-en.pdf

ⁱⁱ Aide aux trans du Québec (2017). *Statistiques sur les personnes transgenres*. URL: <https://atq1980.org/2017/07/01/statistiques-sur-les-personnes-trans/>

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