

## Transgender and non-binary athlete needs: Challenges and best practices

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### Introduction

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How best to include transgender and non-binary athletes in sport, fairly and equitably, has long been clouded in confusion at best and aversion at worst. In the years since the “issue” first emerged, little has changed even though our world is generally more tolerant in many spheres of human activity. Indeed, research into transgender and non-binary inclusion in sport remains in its infancy, compounding the resultant polarization.

Not helpful is the myriad of myths which bedevil any discussion, from understanding something as basic as the terminology around gender identity to close-mindedness about the very real issues transgender and non-binary athletes face day in and day out, often with negative consequences in terms of mental health challenges and coping with the denial of inclusion and equal opportunity to participate in something as basic a human right as sport.

By presenting guidelines, suggested by trans and non-binary athletes themselves, authors Amelie Keyser-Verreault and Guylaine Demers, both of whom are experts in gender equality in sport, hope that Canadian sport leaders, and especially coaches will be inspired to become agents of inclusion. And what a difference that will make to many people currently struggling to find their rightful place in our sport system. – Sheila Robertson, *Journal* Editor.

*The views expressed in the articles of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.*

### Summary

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This article aims to describe the issues and best practices when including transgender (trans) and non-binary people in sports to create safe, welcoming, and inclusive sports environments. It complements the article published on April 2019 ([vol. 19, no. 1](#)) in which the results of three interviews with trans women were presented. Four years later, the conversation (or lack of conversation) on including transgender athletes in sport is intense and polarizing. This can be explained, among other reasons, by the lack of information about the inclusion of trans and non-binary people in sports in Canada. Given the scarcity of guidelines, the various situations experienced by individuals from these historically marginalized groups are managed on a case-

by-case basis by various stakeholders in the sport community, who are minimally equipped, if it all. These stakeholders, not necessarily having expertise on the subject, can be influenced by conscious or unconscious biases on the issue of transgender and non-binary identities. The purpose of this article is to present some of the issues experienced by trans and non-binary athletes and to give them the floor to share practices that promote inclusion. We will therefore present guidelines proposed by 25 trans and non-binary athletes that we met with as part of a research project that is currently underway (<https://lab-profems.fse.ulaval.ca/>). The various Canadian sports organizations and coaches will be able to draw inspiration from it to better promote the inclusion of these athletes.

## Let's start with some definitions: Transgender, non-binary, and cisgender

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Before going into detail, it is essential to understand the terms transgender (trans), non-binary, and cisgender. A transgender person has a gender identity that does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth (e.g., a person born with male genitals, assigned the male gender, but who feels like a woman and is a woman), whereas a cisgender person has a gender identity that matches the sex assigned at birth (e.g., a person born with female genitals, assigned the female gender, and who feels like a woman). A trans woman refers to a person who was born with male genitals and transitioned to become a woman and vice versa for a trans man. There are also trans non-binary people. Non-binary identities represent gender identities other than the exclusive man/woman, female/male binary identities. "Non-binary people may feel neither male nor female, like both, or any other combination of both. Non-binary includes identities related to gender fluidity."<sup>1</sup> These definitions help us understand that gender is a spectrum rather than a binary dyad.

## Introduction

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The discomfort and prejudice in sports organizations are obstacles in the fight against transphobia. In these conditions, coming out can be extremely difficult and include apprehensions, fear of judgment, and negative reactions from the community. This situation has the potential for disastrous consequences. According to the Canadian Trans and Non-binary Youth Health Survey, a third of these young people have attempted suicide.<sup>2</sup> In this context, despite the significant benefits of physical activity, sport is not always welcoming to gender minorities.

The scientific literature tells us that young trans adults who are in medical transition face several obstacles to practicing physical activities and sports despite being motivated to be physically

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.gris.ca/app/uploads/2020/10/GRI2001\\_Guide-pedagogique\\_02.10.20.pdf](https://www.gris.ca/app/uploads/2020/10/GRI2001_Guide-pedagogique_02.10.20.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.saravyc.ubc.ca/2020/03/18/being-safe-being-me-2019/>

active.<sup>3</sup> These barriers include discrimination in both competitive and recreational settings. Consequently, trans people are more involved in sports activities when they can hide their gender identity. A decrease in participation in sport was observed following disclosure of gender identity, which may be related to an acute period of anxiety caused by exposure of the transgender person's body. We also know that these populations are more prone to violence and that locker rooms remain sensitive and often uncomfortable places.

## **Key roles: Sports federations and coaches**

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National Sports Organizations (NSOs) govern all aspects of their sport in Canada, including policy implementation. To our knowledge, at the time of writing, only nine of the 64 NSOs funded by Sport Canada have a trans athlete inclusion policy: rowing, golf, skating, ringette, softball, archery, volleyball, Ultimate Canada, and Biathlon Canada.<sup>4</sup> The implementation of policies to ensure the inclusion of trans people in Canadian sport is not yet mandatory. This is why so many sports organizations are in the fog and unaware of the process when a trans athlete applies to participate in their sport.

For their part, coaches have a special responsibility in developing safe sports environments and inclusive team cultures. They maintain decisive and often personal relationships with athletes and therefore play a direct role in athletes' well-being and personal development. Additionally, they may train trans and non-binary athletes. It is therefore essential that all coaches be aware of and are trained specifically on the inclusion of trans and non-binary athletes.

## **Misconceptions**

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A recent American study published in November 2022 examining the perceptions of more than 1500 NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) coaches on trans athlete participation highlighted how the inclusion of trans girls and women is a misunderstood issue plagued with prejudice. The study revealed that:

- 66.5% of coaches believe that transgender women (who follow the NCAA policy on the participation of transgender student athletes have an unfair physical advantage.
- 52.7% of coaches indicated that transgender men should be allowed to compete in male university sports, while only 19.2% believed that transgender women should be allowed to compete in female university sports.

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<sup>3</sup> Medical transition refers to hormone intake and/or use of gender-affirming surgeries. Social transition, on the other hand, refers to the concept of a person expressing gender differently than the norms and roles associated with the gender assigned at birth. For example, adopting a name and pronouns that correspond to their gender, making aesthetic efforts corresponding to their gender identity (e.g., clothing, makeup, chest, or genital compression). There are several transition paths and not all trans people opt for both types of transition.

<sup>4</sup> Links to these policies can be found at the end of this article.

However, reality tells a different story. A recent literature review<sup>5</sup>, commissioned by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES, 2022) and conducted by the E-Alliance research hub for gender + equity in sport ([E-Alliance \(ealliance.ca\)](https://ealliance.ca)), found that biomedical research results are inconclusive. The following are two misconceptions.

## **Misconception: Testosterone is THE determining factor related to performance**

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When it comes to including trans girls and women in sport, two issues are systematically raised: safety and equity. Indeed, since trans girls and women are born with male organs, it is assumed from the outset that they will have an unfair advantage if they compete against cisgender girls and women. While testosterone can increase a person's strength, sport requires many more skills than solely physical strength. Indeed, physical condition, training, technical ability, age, and experience often play a decisive role in making a person a good athlete. Thus, testosterone is not the only factor that influences performance. In addition, measuring testosterone levels is another way of perpetuating the long tradition of controlling women's bodies in sport.

## **Misconception: The arrival of trans women is detrimental to women's sport**

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This belief is based on a transphobic perspective suggesting that trans women are not women but men. This belief implies that trans women will contaminate women's sport with masculine values and thus destroy years of feminist struggles for a safe space for women athletes. Trans women are women, and they are most certainly not men who want to invade women's sport and take the place of women.<sup>6</sup> In fact, trans women are largely under-represented in the sporting context and their inclusion is far from being promoted at all levels of competition. The problem is not the arrival of trans women in sport but rather how sport is currently organized. The matter of integrating the inclusion of trans women may well require a review of how sport competition is categorized to promote equity and inclusion for all young people who simply want to enjoy the many benefits that sport provides as a human being.

## **Practices that promote the inclusion of trans and non-binary people in sport**

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The trans and non-binary athletes interviewed shared their views on a healthy, safe, and inclusive sports environment. Here is a summary of suggestions and tips specifically addressed to coaches.

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<sup>5</sup> The link to this document is provided at the end of this article.

<sup>6</sup> This fear must be put into perspective: The last Canadian census of 2021 estimated the number of trans women (15 years old and over) at 31 555 out of a population of 36 991 981, therefore representing 0.001% of the Canadian population. Since not all trans women participate in sport, it can be assumed this percentage is even lower in sport.

## **You are responsible for your training on gender identity issues**

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Don't wait to coach a trans and/or non-binary athlete before understanding gender diversity issues because it may be too late, and you may have already hurt or made someone uncomfortable. Be proactive rather than reactive! Moreover, you may have trans and/or non-binary people on your teams without realizing it. There are several training options offered by LGBTQ+ community organizations and you can register or invite them to come and provide training in your sport environment. In Quebec, Égale Action ([Home - Equal Action \(egaleaction.com\)](http://egaleaction.com)) offers training specific to the sport environment, as does Canadian Women & Sport ([Canadian Women & Sport | Powering Better Sport Through Gender Equity \(womenandsport.ca\)](http://womenandsport.ca)). Such training, in addition to giving you useful tools, will help you identify your own unconscious prejudices, deconstruct stereotypes, and perform an essential self-reflection exercise so you can integrate inclusive attitudes into your coaching.

Along the same lines, the trans and non-binary athletes you meet are not responsible for educating you about gender diversity nor are they “case studies” for your training. Do not expect these people to educate you or others at your club or organization on gender identity issues. Living with a transgender or non-binary identity is already difficult, so avoid adding this pressure on their shoulders.

## **Gender identity is sometimes a sensitive subject... sometimes not**

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For some, gender identity can be a sensitive topic. It may therefore be a good idea to wait for the person to tell you about it first. Also, avoid discussing a person's gender identity, transition, or assertion with someone else unless you have explicit permission to do so. Always ask the person how they want this discussion to go, if at all. If a person speaks openly about their gender identity, it is important to recognize that they put their trust in you and to know how to verbalize your recognition (For example, “Thank you for trusting me and sharing this.”).

## **Treat me like others, I don't want to have to come out every day**

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It is important to treat trans and non-binary athletes the same as you would anyone else. A trans man is a man, a trans woman is a woman, and a non-binary person is simply a person. It is essential to always put the individual first and to ensure that your sport is inclusive and that this person can participate and develop to the best of their abilities, as well as have fun. As such, it is disrespectful to be intrusive about a person's gender identity, and to perhaps force them to come out, if they don't want to tell you or talk in public with others present. Another scenario that should be avoided is when a person overeagerly wants to demonstrate their acceptance of another person's gender identity by using gender markers excessively such as repeating “man” in every sentence when speaking to a transgender man.

## **My personality is not defined by my gender identity**

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Each individual, whether self-identifying as part of gender diversity or not, is different and their identity is multifaceted. For example, someone may be an athlete, a civil servant, a spouse, a mother, an artist, and queer while identifying with as a woman. Therefore, it is important to understand the people we meet as a whole and unique and to not reduce them to their gender identity.

## **Don't misgender me**

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Using the right pronouns is the minimum of respect expected. The pronoun used, whether he, she, they, or them, often reflects the person's gender identity. When meeting people for the first time, you can tell them your pronouns. This explicitly demonstrates that you do not assume that others are cisgender.<sup>7</sup> Ensure that names and pronouns are correctly used in conversation and documentation such as team lists. If you make a mistake, apologize, but do not expect the trans or non-binary person to reassure you.

## **There are many pathways to transition, and no two transitions are identical.**

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Many trans and non-binary people go through a gender transition or affirmation process, whether socially, medically, or in other ways. This differs for every person and does not necessarily include hormonal treatment or surgery. There are as many transition processes as there are gender diverse people.

## **Stop asking people what's in their pants or under their skirt!**

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Other people's genitals are none of your concern. Just as you wouldn't ask a cisgender man about the size of his manhood, trans and non-binary people have a right to privacy. A person's genitals do not define their gender identity, and a trans person's choice to undergo gender affirmation surgery is a personal and private choice. Do not ask for any medical or personal information unless it is required for non-discriminatory purposes.

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<sup>7</sup> [Translation] "As opposed to the term 'trans,' the term 'cisgender' refers to people who identify with the gender assigned to them at birth. (...) Cisnormativity (on the other hand) is the assumption that all human beings are cisgender. Cisnormativity is participating in the nonrecognition of trans and non-binary people. This attitude is part of a system of cissexism: discriminatory behaviours and actions that harm trans and non-binary people."

## **A trans or non-binary person is not necessarily someone who is suffering.**

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The discourse in the media and widely perpetuated in the scientific literature may suggest that gender diverse people experience many problems and are suffering from mental health problems and/or suicidal ideation. However, being trans or non-binary does not necessarily produce such suffering; rather, the perception often reflects the contexts of the cisgender societies in which we live. While the gender dysphoria experienced by some gender diverse people and the suffering it produces is intensely discussed, gender euphoria is discussed less frequently and is the manifestation of the joy an individual can feel in their gender affirmation. We are all responsible for providing inclusive environments so that all people, regardless of their gender, can experience such moments of euphoria in which they feel their gender is respected and they can affirm it.

## **Trans and non-binary people use toilets as toilets and changing rooms as changing rooms**

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While some people have concerns over issues that could arise from gender diverse people using sanitary facilities and changing rooms, there is no evidence to support the idea that trans and gender diverse people use toilets, changing rooms, or other facilities to assault or harass other people. In fact, gender diverse people are themselves generally at high risk of being victimized, assaulted, or harassed in these places.<sup>8</sup>

## **Provide non-gendered or gender-appropriate changing rooms**

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Ensure that people can use washrooms, changing rooms, and other facilities that are appropriate for their gender.

## **Let people wear clothes that they are comfortable with**

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Ensure that all athletes, whether gender diverse or not, can wear a uniform in which they are comfortable, and which matches their gender identity.

## **Monitor the experience of trans and non-binary players**

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<sup>8</sup> *The Change Room Project* is a good example of raising awareness about the issues that gender diverse people encounter in changing rooms. <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/toronto-2015-pan-amparapan-am-games-change-room-project>

It is important for your organization to regularly assess the experience of trans and non-binary athletes. To do so, surveys can be sent out once or twice a year. You can also commission a research team to conduct consultations. In all cases, ensure that anonymity is maintained for every respondent, so people feel confident in sharing their experiences. The results of such efforts will help improve your organization's inclusive climate, assess training needs, and determine what initiatives need to be implemented.

## Conclusion: Be an ally

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In any case, what matters is that you are an ally for gender diverse people. The concept of an ally refers to an individual who is a member of a dominant social group sympathizing with a marginalized social group to fight systemic oppression and to help the system evolve into one where power is equitable. This is a matter of implementing a “conscious strategy or set of actions that individuals of a dominant group can undertake to create social change.” Madsen, Townsend, and Scribner (2020) provide a three-point definition of an ally that follows this same direction, “[A]llies are aware of the power they have, and the related injustice experienced by those who are oppressed; and second, they have a sense of accountability and take intentional action. [...] They support the members of a disadvantaged group, even when a member of that group is not in the room.” Be prepared to apply the above practices.

## About the Authors

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### **Amélie Keyser-Verreault**

Amélie Keyser-Verreault is a researcher at Laval University within the research laboratory for the progression of women in sports in Quebec, the Lab PROFEMS. Dr Keyser-Verreault's research focuses on body politics, gender, and sexualities with an emphasis on beauty politics, maternity, fat, and resistance. She also has a deep interest in qualitative art-based, decolonial and intersectional methodologies. Her work has been published in academic journals such as the Journal of Gender Studies, Chinese Sociological Review,

Ethnography, European Journal of Cultural Studies, and Feminism & Psychology.



### **Guylaine Demers**

Full professor at Laval University, Guylaine Demers has promoted gender equality in sport for most of her life. Over the years, she has become the go-to leader, researcher, and advocate on issues of women's education and gender equity in Quebec and Canadian sport. Dr. Demers is a recipient of the IOC women and sport award for the Americas that acknowledge her tremendous contribution to the advancement of women in sport. Appointed co-director of

the first Canadian center for research on gender equity in sport in 2020, she is now taking on her new challenge: directing the first Quebec research lab for the progression of women in sports, the lab PROFEMS.



## Free online resources

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### *In French*

<https://sportaide.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Personnes-Trans-inclusion-court.pdf>

[https://www.cces.ca/sites/default/files/content/docs/pdf/transgenderwomenathletesandelitesport-ascientificreview-executivesummary-f\\_0.pdf](https://www.cces.ca/sites/default/files/content/docs/pdf/transgenderwomenathletesandelitesport-ascientificreview-executivesummary-f_0.pdf)

### *In English*

[https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/ctg/GLSEN\\_CTG2021\\_Coaches\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/ctg/GLSEN_CTG2021_Coaches_Guide.pdf)

[https://www.cces.ca/sites/default/files/content/docs/pdf/transgenderwomenathletesandelitesport-ascientificreview-executivesummary-e\\_0.pdf](https://www.cces.ca/sites/default/files/content/docs/pdf/transgenderwomenathletesandelitesport-ascientificreview-executivesummary-e_0.pdf)

[https://sportpsych.unt.edu/sites/default/files/ncaacoachesperceptionsoftransgenderathletesportparticipation\\_presentation.pdf](https://sportpsych.unt.edu/sites/default/files/ncaacoachesperceptionsoftransgenderathletesportparticipation_presentation.pdf)

## Inclusion Policies

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Ultimate Canada (2020). Gender Equity Policy.

[gender-equity-policy.pdf \(d36m266ykvepgv.cloudfront.net\)](#)

Biathlon Canada (2022). Gender Inclusion Policy.

[Biathlon Canada announces new policy on gender inclusion](#)

**References available upon request.**