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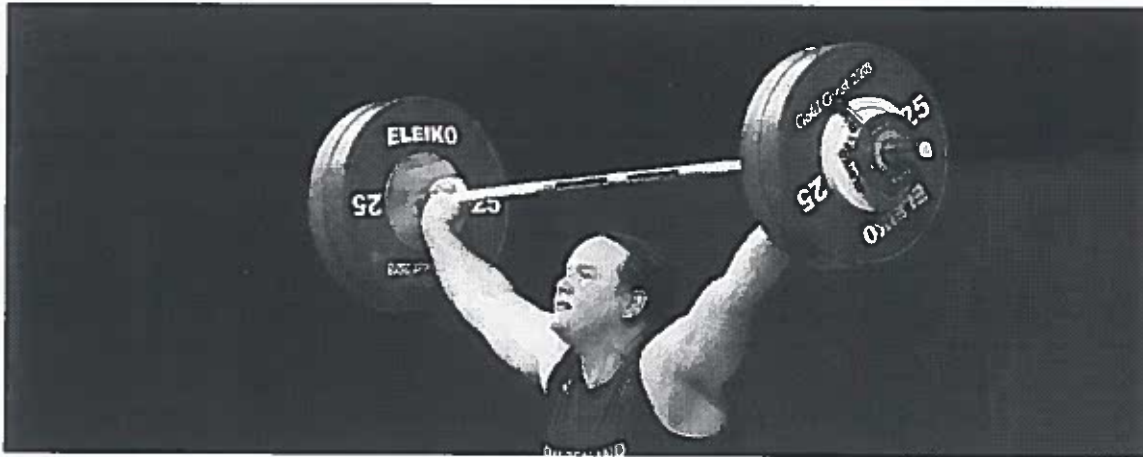
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In search of a level playing field. How male-to-female transgender athletes are impacting women's sports

The challenge of transgender and intersex athletes is perceived as a contemporary issue, but it has vexed sports federations for almost 100 years

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New Zealand's Laurel Hubbard lifts in the snatch of the women's +90kg weightlifting final at the 2018 Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast, Australia. Hubbard is being billed as the first transgender athlete to compete at the Olympics. Mark Schiefelbein / Associated Press



By Doug Robinson

The Summer Olympics have long been a forum for politically charged causes, and the delayed 2020 Tokyo Games will be no different. Among the athletes competing in the Games is Laurel Hubbard, who will represent New Zealand in the women's weightlifting competition.

Once upon a time Hubbard competed in weightlifting — as a man.

As Gavin Hubbard, he set national records in junior competition (under 20). He transitioned to female in 2012 and underwent hormone therapy. Laurel Hubbard ignited protests of unfairness after winning two gold medals and a silver medal in the 2019 Pacific Games. Hubbard is 6-foot-1, 287 pounds and the oldest woman in the Olympic competition, at 43.

She is being billed as the first transgender woman to compete in the Olympics, but that isn't quite right. The Olympics have a long history of athletes whose gender was fluid or

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anyone that has trained weightlifting at a high level knows this to be true in their bones: This particular situation is unfair to the sport and to the athletes.”

In other words, is it fair for women — who had to wait decades for the creation of women’s sports, separate from the men, to level the playing field — to have to compete against women who were born as men? It’s the ultimate dilemma in this era when equity for all is the big issue of the day: Women’s rights vs. transgender rights. As Van Bellinghen said, you can’t have it both ways.

A few years ago, the presence of a male-to-female (MTF) transgender athlete in women’s competitions would have alarmed athletes, coaches and fans, but they might have been consoled by the extreme rarity of such cases. That is no longer the case. The transgender issue is showing up at every level of sport with increased frequency and has now reached the halls of Congress.

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College sports

During the 2019-20 school year, the University of Montana’s Jonathan Eastwood, one of the better male middle-distance runners in the Big Sky Conference the previous three years, began competing as a woman after undergoing a year of hormone therapy per NCAA rules. She not only won the women’s mile race in the indoor conference championships, but she beat her nearest rival by a whopping 4½ seconds. She also rallied Montana’s

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June Eastwood (No. 4228), a transgender athlete on the University of Montana cross-country team, competes in a meet in 2019. [University of Montana]

Brian Schweyen, Montana's coach at the time, informed other teams of Eastwood's transition at an annual meeting of Big Sky coaches in July 2019 in Salt Lake City. Weber State coach Paul Pilkington was not happy about it.

"If she wants to transition, have at it, but there are consequences to this decision to let her compete," he said at the time. "It really hurts women's athletics. It's not fair. They have all these rules to keep a level playing field — drug testing and so on — but in this case, they turn a blind eye to it."

Pilkington informed his women's team about Eastwood's transition to female competition. Afterward, one of Pilkington's athletes — a conference champion distance runner — came to him in tears. "I'll never win the conference again," she told the coach.

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Later, Pilkington told the Deseret News, “People don’t care about this issue because they don’t think it impacts them, but as soon as it does, they care. We need national legislation; otherwise, it’s going to keep coming up.” Report ad

That’s exactly what Utah Sen. Mike Lee wants to do. In early February, he led GOP colleagues in introducing the Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act, a bill he says would protect athletic opportunities for female athletes.

When transgender athletes compete against women, women’s sports are no longer women’s sports; they become unisex athletic events. This bill would protect the opportunity of girls throughout America to athletically compete against other girls.” — Utah Sen. Mike Lee

“When transgender athletes compete against women, women’s sports are no longer women’s sports; they become unisex athletic events,” Lee said in a statement. “This bill would protect the opportunity of girls throughout America to athletically compete against other girls.”

A few weeks earlier, Lee told reporters, “This is not about being transphobic or having anything against transgender persons. This is a simple question of fairness and physical

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The battle lines are drawn. [President Joe Biden signed an executive order](#) Jan. 20, 2021, that mandates, among other things, that any school that receives federal funding must allow transgender males to compete in female sports. [The Equality Act](#), passed by the House in February, would pave the way for male-to-female transgender athletes to compete against women and girls.

Utah is among those that mandate that transgender individuals be allowed to compete in high school competitions with the sex with which they identify. The [Utah High School Activities Association](#) policy requires male-to-female transgender athletes to undergo a year of hormone therapy under the supervision of a licensed doctor and with the involvement of the parents, but does not mandate any post-treatment testing to measure the effectiveness of the therapy.

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[Utah transgender athlete bill: A 'fair playing field' or discrimination and harmful?](#)

Some 20 states proposed bills during the past year designed to stop male-to-female transgender athletes from competing against women, and [Idaho passed such a bill](#) in 2020. Utah state Rep. Kera Birkeland, R-Morgan, recently filed a state bill titled [Preserving Sports for Female Students](#), which would prohibit a student of the "male sex from participating in an athletic activity designated for female students."

The prevailing argument against such a bill was articulated by Troy Williams, director of Equality Utah, during a legislative hearing: "This bill does discriminate. It tells some children, 'You can't play, you don't belong on the field. And that's discrimination.'"

Big differences between male, female athletes

It shouldn't be surprising that an increasing number of transgender athletes are competing in this era when gender fluidity is so prevalent. Time will tell what the repercussions will be. Meanwhile, the sports world has been caught unprepared. It is one thing when a biological woman wants to compete as a man, but quite another when a biological man wants to compete as a woman.

The difference between male and female athletes is vast. Rep. Karen Kwan, D-Murray, was remarkably uninformed when she told the Utah Legislature earlier this year. "I

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are completely, almost, two separate sports. If I were to play (British star) [Andy Murray](#), I would lose 6-0, 6-0 in five to six minutes, maybe 10 minutes. No, it's true. It's a completely different sport. The men are a lot faster and they serve harder, they hit harder, it's just a different game."

In 2017, the [U.S. women's soccer team](#) played a friendly against an under-15 MLS training academy boys team in Texas. The women lost 5-2. They won the [Women's World Cup](#) two years later.

When males reach puberty, their bodies begin producing large amounts of testosterone, the original, natural, performance-enhancing drug. It gives them increased strength, endurance, power, size and muscle mass, with less fat and bigger and denser bones, which can support bigger muscles and internal organs. The advantages of such hormones are so great that some athletes take synthetic hormones — anabolic steroids — to increase those advantages over their own sex.

Testosterone accounts for the difference between male and female athletic performance, and that difference is one of the very reasons women's sports were created in the first place — to bring an even playing field. Other concessions have also been made for females — shorter tee boxes (golf), lower nets (volleyball) and hurdles (track), smaller implements (track and field) and smaller balls (basketball).

Separation of the sexes

With the emergence of male-to-female transgender athletes, the competitive concerns are obvious: The separation of the sexes is compromised and biological men could potentially deny women of opportunities they were denied at every level of sport for decades until the passage of Title IX in the '70s — scholarships, roster spots, contracts, prize money, medals — if not put them at increased risk of injury in contact sports (see sidebar note in which MTF fighter Fallon Fox seriously injured her female opponent in the first two minutes of their bout).

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Transgender women in sports

Elevated levels of testosterone are present in two types of female athletes — transgender and intersex. Transgender individuals are those who feel they are in the wrong body of the

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championships during the late 1920s. In the spring of 1936, she underwent female-to-male reassignment surgery, retired from sport, changed her name to Mark, married and fathered three children.

Zdenek Koubek, a Czech track athlete, won five national championships and set a world record at 800 meters in 1934 as a woman. She underwent female-to-male surgery in 1936 and retired from sport.

Because of those two athletes, the president of the International Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage, worried that men could overtake women's sports. The IOC had allowed women to compete in only a handful of events up to that time, and now the organization was trying to protect them, beginning with the 1936 Olympics. Brundage called for sex verification rules, which included a visual inspection of private parts by doctors.



Finish of the 100-meter dash of the Summer Olympics at the Olympic Stadium in Los Angeles, United States on August 2, 1932. From left to right are Eileen Hiscock, England, 4th; Marie Collinger, Germany, tied for 5th; Stella Walsh (Stanislawa Walasiewicz), running under colors of Poland, Winner; Elizabeth Wilde, U.S. Tied for 5th; Hilda Strike, Canada, second, and Wilhelmina von Bremen, U.S., third. | Associated Press

What Brundage didn't know was that at least one intersex athlete had already broken into the Olympics and another was about to do so. Polish sprinter Stella Walsh won the

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In 1966, the International Association of Athletics Federations (the governing body for track and field) began using a chromosome test to determine gender. Some athletes simply dropped out of the sport to avoid testing, and a handful failed the test, most notably Spanish hurdler Maria José Martínez Patiño at the 1985 World University Games. Warned not to compete anymore as a woman, she did so anyway and was identified as intersex.

"I lost friends, my fiancé, hope and energy," she recalled to The Times.

Indian sprinter Dutee Chand, who also had high levels of testosterone, wound up in legal battles to compete a few years ago.

Poster child

The athlete who brought the most attention to the transgender world was Richard Raskind. In the 1950s, the 6-foot-2 Raskind was one of the nation's top collegiate tennis players and captain of the Yale team. He chose medical school over a pro tennis career but still competed in the U.S. Open five times. In 1975, at the age of 41, he underwent surgery and transitioned to female, becoming Renée Richards. She then began competing in women's competitions in California as Renée Clark.



Renée Richards of Newport Beach, Calif., prepares for a forearm shot in a match at the professional women's tennis

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She competed on the women's tour four more years, briefly appearing in the top 20 of the rankings, then retired at 47. "If I had played (women's tennis) in my 20s, I would have won Wimbledon," she told [Sports Illustrated](#) years later. She also added that if she had won, "I would've quit. That (the victory) wouldn't have been good for anyone. Not me and not women's tennis."

The Richards case established a precedent, and the LGBTQ movement gave it a boost in the name of tolerance and inclusion. Today's political climate has made it difficult to ban transgender and intersex athletes from women's sports. Some federations have done so anyway. Besides the weightlifting federations, the IOC and World Athletics (formerly the International Amateur Athletic Federation) not only require male-to-female transgender athletes to undergo hormone therapy for a year prior to competition, but they continue to monitor testosterone levels with testing.

Hard science

In 2016, the [IOC](#) established new rules that allow male-to-female transgender athletes to compete in women's sports if their testosterone is below 10 nanomoles per liter for 12 months, and surgery is not required. The allowable testosterone level is still extremely high by female standards — the average is 2.6 nmol/L for women and 23 nmol/L for men. In other words, the system already has excessive latitude built into it — so much latitude that even after hormone-suppression therapy, transgender athletes could still be in the normal male range and be "legal" for women's competition.

In October 2019, World Athletics — the international governing body for track and field — cut in half the IOC limits, declaring that [testosterone levels](#) in transgender and intersex athletes must be 5nM or lower for 12 months prior to competition.



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Uganda's Francine Niyonsaba and Kenya's Margaret Nyairera Wambui cross the line in a Women's 800m semifinal during the World Athletics Championships in London Friday, Aug. 11, 2017. Niyonsaba and Wambui, along with Caster Semenya, were banned from the 2019 world track championships because they refused to undergo the World Athletic's mandated hormone therapy. | David J. Phillip, Associated Press

In July 2019, all three of the 800-meter medalists in the 2016 Olympic Games — African intersex athletes [Caster Semenya](#), [Francine Niyonsaba](#) and [Margaret Wambui](#) — were banned from competition because they refused to undergo the World Athletic's mandated hormone therapy. They will not compete in Tokyo either. The reaction from some in the media and the LGBTQ community was to brand the policy “transphobic” and “bigoted.”

World Athletics president [Sebastian Coe](#) told CNN, “... at this point my responsibility was to protect two classifications and that's what we feel we've done. ... Look, no federation, very few big organizations, wanted to take the lead role in the challenges around DSD (disorders of sex development), and clearly these inspire societal discussions as well. Transgender is going to be a massive issue, not just for athletics but for so many other sports. ... I'm happy that our sport is brave enough to want to challenge these issues and take them head-on. And that doesn't always leave you in popular positions, but they do tend to be the right positions to be in.”

It took World Athletics a decade to ban Semenya, the world and Olympic champion. [As reported in the Deseret News](#) in 2017, after the South African won the 2009 World Championships by 2½ seconds, World Athletics ordered her to undergo gender testing and then banned her from competition. World Athletics reluctantly cleared her return less than a year later, but in 2011, the federation established limits on testosterone for female athletes and required those who exceeded those limits to take medication.

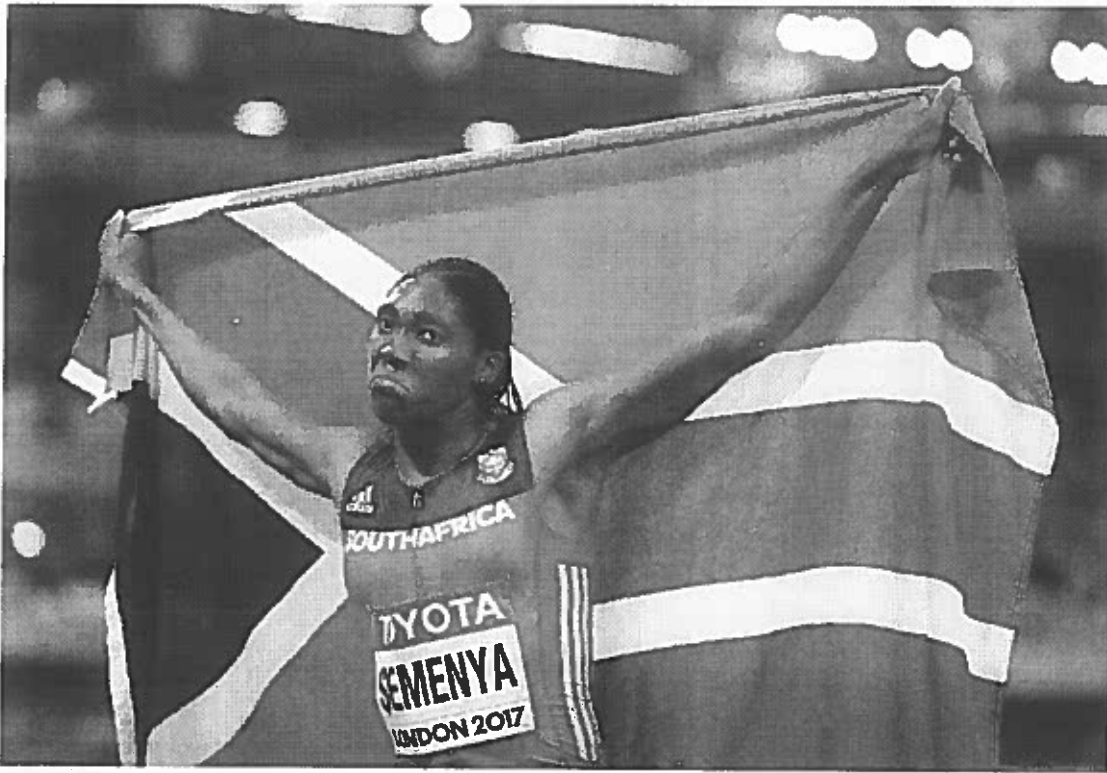
In an ironic twist, a sport that had tried for years to rid its competition of drug use was now ordering certain athletes to take drugs. It's uncertain if Semenya took the medication, but her times slowed dramatically — from a best of 1:55.45 in 2009, to 1:56.35 in 2011, 1:57.23 in 2012, 1:58.92 in 2013 and 2:02.66 in 2014.

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In this Sunday, Aug. 13, 2017, file photo, South Africa's Caster Semenya celebrates winning the gold in the final of the women's 800 meters during the World Athletics Championships in London. Forced out of her favorite race by World Athletics' testosterone rules, the two-time Olympic champion in the 800 meters took a late punt at qualifying for Tokyo in the 5,000 meters. She came up short. Now 30, Semenya's hopes of ever making it back to the Olympics are dwindling. [David J. Phillip/Associated Press]

In July 2015, the Court of Arbitration for Sport suspended World Athletics' rules for two years to allow time to study the issue. The research, which studied 2,127 male and female athletes from the 2011 and 2013 world championships, shows that women with high levels of testosterone have a "significant competitive advantage" — a 1.8% to 4.5% advantage to be precise. That might not sound like much, but in the 800 that would mean up to five seconds. The research didn't even consider women with testosterone levels in the male range, as is the case with intersex athletes.

"If, as the [study shows](#), in certain events female athletes with higher testosterone levels can have a competitive advantage of between 1.8%-4.5% over female athletes with lower testosterone levels, imagine the magnitude of the advantage for female athletes with testosterone levels in the normal male range," reported Dr. Stephane Bermon, director of World Athletics health and science.

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Another 25% of the study group remained below the male range, while another 25% was “unable to achieve any significant suppression.”

Schweyen, Eastwood’s former coach, noted in the fall of 2019 that hormone therapy produced a dramatic difference in “what Jonathan looked like and what June looks like now. There’s a big difference — facial and body type.” But even when hormone therapy reduces testosterone levels, it does not undo what nature has already created during puberty — larger bones, larger lungs, larger oxygen-carrying capacity.

As Dr. Kristopher Hunt worded it in [letter](#) to JayCee Cooper, a male-to-female powerlifter, “Transgender male-to-female individuals having gone through male puberty confer an unfair competitive advantage over non-transgender females due to increased bone density and muscle mass from pubertal exposure to testosterone.”

Craig Poole, former director of the USA Olympic Training Center in California, puts it more succinctly: “Any athlete who has gone through puberty as a male has permanent advantages.”

‘There just isn’t enough knowledge’

Schweyen clearly supported Eastwood, but even he volunteered this: “I don’t know if there are enough studies. This is so new. I believe the NCAA will look into this deeply. There are going to have to be changes. There just isn’t enough knowledge.”

The question is, will intersex policy in sport be based on real science or on political correctness?

When Idaho passed the bill banning male-to-female transgender athletes from competing in women’s sports, [CNN’s](#) headline was, “[Idaho’s governor signs two bills that limit the rights of transgender people,](#)” rather than “Idaho’s governor signs two bills that protect the rights of women.”

It is risky even to voice a dissenting opinion. Former and current female athletes have spoken out against male-to-female transgender athletes competing against women and paid for it.

“It’s insane and it’s cheating,” wrote former tennis great [Martina Navratilova](#), a lesbian and longtime gay-rights activist. “I am happy to address a transgender woman in whatever form she prefers, but I would not be happy to compete against her. It would not be fair. To

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Others have braved the backlash. [Paula Radcliffe](#), the world record-holder in the marathon, has been unapologetically critical of transgender athletes in women's sport. She said it would be "naive" not to regulate transgender individuals; otherwise, she said, it would be "the death of women's sport."

Ana Paula Henkel, a former Brazilian Olympic volleyball player, has taken a very public and equally unapologetic stand against male-to-female transgender athletes in sport. She wrote [an open letter to the IOC](#) in December 2018 opposing its policy toward transgender athletes titled, "In defense of women's professional sports."

She wrote, "It is with respect, but much concern that I write to all entities responsible for sport, about the threat to the virtue of women's competitions that now occurs with the acceptance of athletes that were born men, developed muscle mass, bone mass, lung and air capacity as men, in forms of sport created and formatted specifically for women. If someone has to go public and pay a price in the name of truth, common sense and fact, I'm willing to bear the consequences."

"... Is it fair to simply pretend away undeniable biological differences in the name of a political ideology which will serve to restrict a space so hard won by women who struggled for it for so many centuries? How to accept 'biological' men in fighting competitions, pitilessly hitting women, and then gaining acclaim, medals and money for it? Have we all gone so crazy as to permit such degradation?"

"... How long are we going to keep quiet while we witness this? I refuse to. ... There is a just and pertinent conversation to be had about the prejudices surrounding transsexuality and homosexuality. Transsexuals' inclusion in society needs to be accepted, but this rushed and heedless decision to include biological men, born and built with testosterone, with their height, their strength and aerobic capacity of men, is beyond the sphere of tolerance. It represses, embarrasses, humiliates and excludes women."

Is it time for third classification?

There are necessary qualifications and classifications for competition, whether they come in the form of age groups, weight classes, ability or gender. Not everyone makes the team. It's not a right. As [USA Powerlifting](#) put it, by way of explaining its ban against male-to-female transgender athletes: "USA Powerlifting is not a fit for every athlete and for every medical condition or situation. Simply, not all powerlifters are eligible to compete in USA Powerlifting."

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and Why Track and Field's New Rules on Intersex Athletes are Essential." Coleman, a professor of law at Duke who is considered [an expert in anti-doping rules and sports law](#), is also a former world-class 800-meter runner.

"Understanding the rules and why they make sense is hard," she wrote. "They are based in biology people don't know or don't like to talk about and, let's be honest, at least in some circles, they're politically incorrect. ... They run counter to the movement that seeks to include transgender and intersex people in social institutions based on their gender identity rather than their biology.

"These are important progressive developments, but their effects on valuable institutions like women's sport are real and they need to be understood before positions harden on bad information. Pretending that ... we can't define the boundaries between men's and women's bodies is a bad idea for many reasons. Replacing traditional sex classifications with classifications based on gender identity certainly has steep costs in contexts like competitive sport, where the likelihood of success is precisely about sex-specific biology."

[Joanna Harper](#), a competitive transgender runner herself and a medical physicist, has done considerable research on transgender athletes in sport. "... Allowing these athletes to compete in women's sport with their serious testosterone-based advantage threatens the very fabric of women's sport," she once said in a Q&A with exercise physiologist [Ross Tucker](#).

Harper, who has been a consultant for the IOC and World Athletics, told [The Seattle Times](#), "The gender identity doesn't matter, it's the testosterone levels."

Like the IOC and World Athletics, the NCAA requires hormone therapy for male-to-female transgender athletes, but not testing, which is another ironic twist since the NCAA tests for anabolic steroids, which are essentially synthetic testosterone.

[Letsrun.com](#) shared concerns about the NCAA policy, noting, "There is no mention of a minimum testosterone level that must be achieved or a minimum level of medication that must be taken, nor how those levels are to be monitored. Contrast that to the International Olympic Committee, which requires that a male-to-female transgender athlete 'must demonstrate that her total testosterone level in serum has been below 10 nmol/L for at least 12 months prior to her first competition.'"

As alluded to by Weber State's Pilkington, there are serious questions about the efficacy of

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