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Navigating the Athletic Terrain for Transgender Athletes:

Identity, Policy, and the Future

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the School of Continuing Studies and Academic Outreach

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

by

Lia Bevins

August, 2020

Dr. Marie Tedesco, Chair

Dr. Jill LeRoy-Frazier

Dr. Andrew Dotterweich

Keywords: Transgender, Gender, Feminism, Sports, Social Construction

ABSTRACT

Navigating the Athletic Terrain for Transgender Athletes: Identity, Policy, and the Future

by

Lia Bevins

Transgender athletes face scrutiny because they do not fit within the traditional and constructed bounds of male and female. The objective of this study was to discover how to provide advocacy to this marginalized population amidst discriminating policies and transphobic environments. The research included a survey of high school coaches from thirty schools throughout Tennessee along with interviews with five transgender athletes from across the United States. All five athletes reported that leaders were the most impactful allies in their lives and can be the main sources of advocacy for transgender athletes. Survey findings showed that not every coach throughout Tennessee will accept transgender athletes but in each region of Tennessee some coaches claimed to support and would resist discriminatory policies. Leaders have the opportunity to pave the way for transgender athletes by providing advocacy and amplifying the voices of transgender athletes.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my parents who have always supported every dream, thank you. You are both exemplary of hard work and dedication. I can only hope to make you proud. And to my partner and wife Kendra, thank you for being with me every step of the way. I am grateful to each of you for believing in me. I could not have done this without you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend a humble thank you to the five athletes that shared their experiences with me throughout this research. Your experiences are among the many more which must be heard and honored for change to occur. I would also like to thank the many coaches who completed the survey for this study and who wanted to continue this conversation further. May those conversations continue in your schools and on your sports teams. And thank you to my professors and committee members, Dr. Marie Tedesco, Dr. Jill LeRoy-Frazier, and Dr. Andrew Dotterweich. I appreciate your wisdom and guidance throughout this process.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I often like to talk about feminism not as something that adheres to bodies, not as something grounded in gendered bodies, but as an approach – as a way of conceptualizing, as a methodology, as a guide to strategies for struggle. That means feminism doesn't belong to anyone in particular.

- Angela Davis

The conflict surrounding transgender athletes stirs emotions, questions, and concerns about the integrity of sports, specifically women's sports, and the integrity of gender. This is an appropriate starting point from which to discuss the present status and the future of gender and sports. Attorney, educator, and trans activist Dean Spade calls for a radical change concerning trans rights: "We need a critical trans politics that perpetually questions its own effectiveness, that refuses to take for granted stories about what counts as change that actually maintain certain structures and categories."¹ The current environment for transgender athletes is hostile and unstable. This research questions the status quo and the future for transgender athletes in an effort to identify how to create positive change in their lives. This study shares the voices and experiences of five transgender athletes to help others to better understand the level of discrimination trans people face and to understand how cis gender people can be better allies, specifically in the sports arena. For this research I identify as a researcher in feminist cultural studies, drawing definition from Krane et. al.: "[cultural studies scholars] specifically focus on the interaction of gender and culture."² Krane et. al. interrogate how social practices construct

¹ *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (New York: South End Press, 2011), 20.

² My identity as an athlete also greatly influenced the direction of this research. Spending both my high school and college years as an athlete provided me with valuable perspective concerning the inclusion of transgender athletes. I recognize the importance of skill, strength, and other physical traits that all influence a person's athletic ability. I also support the inclusion of transgender athletes and hope this research can shed light on discriminatory nature of sports towards this population of athletes.

gender and gender differences.³ Cultural expectations of femininity and masculinity underlie this analysis. My research utilizes this approach, focusing on the construction of gender and how the power behind this construction affects women's sports and transgender athletes. Spade encourages his readers to recognize their role in the subjection of trans people. He uses the term "subjection," rather than "oppression," because he contends the former better encompasses the idea that power relations exist between everyone, and in the case of this research, between cis women and trans women. Although both populations experience oppression, some cis women also participate as the oppressor and therefore are not innocent bystanders. Moreover, transgender athletes are oppressed by the other cis gender individuals in their lives including coaches, administrators, and more.⁴ As Spade mentioned, "'oppression' brings to mind the notion that one set of people are dominating another set of people, that one set of people 'have power' and another set are denied it . . . the term 'subjection' captures how the systems of meaning and control that concern us permeate our lives, our ways of knowing about the world, and our ways of imagining transformation."⁵ This research asks the reader to question his/her own role in the subjection of trans people and systems in place that support this subjection.

In addition to speaking with transgender athletes, my research includes a survey of high school coaches from thirty schools across the state of Tennessee. This survey gathered information concerning the opinions held towards transgender athletes and the proposed House Bill 1572 which, if passed, would require all athletes in Tennessee to compete as the sex they were assigned at birth, not as the gender with which they identify.⁶ This bill is one of many that

³ Vikki Krane, Precilla Choi, Shannon Baird, Chistine Aimar, and Kerrie Kauer, "Living the Paradox: Female Athletes Negotiate Femininity and Masculinity," *Sex Roles* 50, no. 5/6 (2004): 315-316. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:SERS.0000018888.48437.4f>.

⁴ Spade, 25.

⁵ Spade, 25.

⁶ "HB 1572 Summary," Tennessee General Assembly, Accessed June 8, 2020. <http://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/Default.aspx?BillNumber=HB1572>.

have recently been introduced throughout the United States. Together, the interviews and surveys link the needs of transgender athletes to those who hold the most power in their lives as athletes, that is, their coaches.

Research Questions

The following are questions this research intended to answer through this study:

1. How do high school coaches throughout Tennessee perceive transgender athletes and the impact they have on sports?
2. What are the experiences of transgender athletes?
3. How do these experiences inform others to be better allies?
4. What does the future look like for transgender athletes competing in the state of Tennessee?

Significance of the Study

Published research concerning transgender athletes continues to increase each day although the breadth of research is still minimal. I have encountered few studies that combine the experiences of transgender athletes with coaches' opinions in order to marry findings from the two. This study not only aims to speak to transgender individuals but also to those who want to understand their marginalized athletes and to provide visibility and respect towards them. This study is significant because it asks trans athletes to share their stories in order for others to help trans athletes in the future and to give them voice and agency. It provides real life examples of how coaches and administrators can be allies to the trans community. Furthermore, this study illustrates to coaches and others the many easy steps they can take to better the lives of marginalized athletes.

Chapter Structure

Chapter One introduces the reader to the concepts discussed in this study and the focus of this research. Chapter Two, “Literature Review,” evaluates literature by scholars, academics, scientists, and other researchers who focus on gender as it pertains to sports. Chapter Three, “Methodology,” breaks down the methodology used in this research for both the interviews and surveys. Chapter Four, “Results,” includes results from the survey and interviews. This chapter also offers analysis of the results and discussion of the findings. Chapter Five concludes the thesis with final thoughts, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

French philosopher Jacques Derrida influenced many modes of criticism by which to examine oppositions presented throughout society in order to determine the fundamental make up of such dualisms. In Western philosophy, these binaries often have resulted in a hierarchy of opposing concepts where one is understood as superior and the other inferior. This is evident when observing the binaries of gender, sex, and race, among others, which have resulted in power dynamics that permeate into society and then become the assumed norm for everyday life. As *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes, Derrida proposed the idea of deconstruction as a way to “restructure, or ‘displace,’ the opposition, not simply to reverse it” and loosely defined deconstruction as “a critical dismantling of tradition and traditional modes of thought.”⁷ Deconstruction, as it applies to gender, asks the researcher to understand the historical determinants of gender and the gender binary while also attempting to reconstruct the notion of gender so as to eliminate the inequalities. Although individuals exist outside the strict gender parameters of man and woman, they do so while facing scrutiny and limited visibility that sparks questions and creates stereotypes concerning their lifestyle. Within the last 50 years, tradition has evolved and attitudes towards the queer community have shifted towards a more accepting and inclusive political environment demonstrated through legislation and rights such as same sex marriage and same sex adoption rights. Yet, transgender persons, who are also members of the LGBTQ+ community, have not been so fortunate. Still today, these individuals face strong discrimination that threatens their physical safety and health.

Transgender athletes experience unique levels of discrimination specific to sports that involve teammates, coaches, administration, policies, and competitors. This research focuses on

⁷ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Deconstruction,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (December 12, 2019): Accessed July 12, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/deconstruction>.

these individuals who break the sports world's binary molds that have been reinforced through years of invasive testing, exclusion, and wide-spread gender norms. Transgender athletes challenge the Western binary standard that is accepted and reinforced within sports, resulting in backlash through physical harm, ridicule, and discriminatory policies that aim to further hinder the athletes' inclusion in the gender category with which they identify, but not the one assigned at birth. The following is a close look at the history of gender and its social construction as it pertains to the sporting arena. This analysis also discusses how gender influenced sports for marginalized populations such as women and transgender people.

The Gender Binary

Transgender individuals introduce a complex contradiction because they not only challenge binary thinking about sex and gender, they also adhere to gender norms rooted in binary thinking. Because Western society has yet to fully accept non-binary and gender-non-conforming populations, the only expression available to trans people are the binary constraints of masculine for men and feminine for women. In order to have their gender affirmed by other individuals, trans people must display hyper masculine or feminine characteristics. The binary of sex, male and female, has been embedded into everyday lives from a very early age and continues to be reinforced in nearly every corner of the United States. Everything from children's play toys to shaving razors to power tools are gendered in an effort to market to a target audience. For instance, young girls grow up wearing pink and purple clothing and play with dolls and make-up which seem harmless enough. But they also grow up learning to be gentle, soft spoken, and submissive which are the traits that feed into the gender role often assigned to females. In contrast, young boys are gifted toys like footballs and toy guns and wear colors like blue and green. They are also raised to assert themselves and have a confident

personality. The stark contrast between how young boys and girls conventionally are raised not only sparks the notion of gender roles within their minds but it also strongly dictates their future that is also defined by how society treats gender throughout the world. Transgender individuals also grow up with these rigid notions of gender that hinder their options for expression when they recognize their gender identity does not align with their gender assigned to them at birth.

Two scholars well known for their analysis of the gender binary and gender performance are Candace West and Don Zimmerman. They first examined gender performance in 1987 and revisited this concept again in 2009.⁸ In the earlier analysis, the two referred to Harold Garfinkle's case study of a transgender woman named Agnes. West and Zimmerman described how Agnes had to learn the ins and outs of being a woman. Although Agnes identified as a trans woman, she still had to adhere to the binary. This included more than wearing feminine clothing or learning to display submissive behavior. Agnes had to study other women and observe how men critiqued and spoke about women and then adjust her own behavior accordingly. Part of this learning process was also recognizing the power dynamics between men and women and where she fell within this conflict.⁹ West and Zimmerman revisit their evaluation of gender and doing gender many years later to discuss in further detail the systems that impact gender, especially for trans individuals. They note that cisgender individuals may not adhere to the masculine or feminine standards of their gender, and yet their validity as a male or female is not questioned by other members in society. West and Zimmerman pin point the true motivation behind questioning a person's sex or gender - their genitals. Western society has come to believe that a person's sex and gender are directly correlated to their anatomy, causing transgender individuals, and intersex persons, to challenge this assumed norm. The two scholars identified that trans

⁸ "Doing Gender," *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2 (June 1987): 125-51, and "Accounting for Doing Gender," *Gender and Society* 23, no. 1 (February 2009): 112-22. (JSTOR)

⁹ "Doing Gender," 1987, 134-135.

individuals utilize gender norms to communicate their identity to the outside world and yet, they continue to face discrimination and doubt due to their anatomical make up.¹⁰

Other scholars, among them Judith Lorber and Surya Monro, examined the gender binary and transgender individuals' fit within this widely-accepted concept. Lorber, professor, academic, and pioneer of gender studies and the concept of social construction of gender, wrote widely on the discrepancy in the treatment of women versus men rooted in the gender binary. This binary is one of the many ways individuals begin to organize their own lives and the lives of others. Gender is displayed to others through performances embedded in almost every part of daily life. The display communicates to others what a person's gender is and how they want to be understood by outside observers. Individuals who do not cling to the strong binary and instead have an ambiguous gender display then cause confusion, leading outside observers to question their gender. Consequently, gender not only allows people to curate identities but it also dictates the way an individual communicates this identity to others.¹¹ Concerning the identity of transgender individuals, Lorber noted that trans people do not challenge the social construction of gender because trans people, like cis gender people, are also bound by the binary.¹² Lorber continues, "bending gender rules and passing between genders does not erode but rather preserves gender boundaries."¹³ She also acknowledged that everyone performs gender and relies on the gender binary, not only transgender individuals. She contends that behaviors and ways of presenting oneself linked to the binary's gender prescriptions apply to cis and trans persons.¹⁴

¹⁰ "Accounting for Doing Gender," *Gender and Society* 23, no. 1 (February 2009): 118. (JSTOR)

¹¹ Judith Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, Yale University Press, 1994, 15. (JSTOR)

¹² Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, 20.

¹³ Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, 21.

¹⁴ *Paradoxes of Gender*, 14.

English gender studies scholar Surya Monroe also examines that gender often acts as a form of communication between individuals, especially for transgender people.¹⁵ She suggests an important perspective concerning this question: “Gender categorisation of some sort seems to be socially necessary for some people at present - what is then in question is whether this has to be binary categorisation.”¹⁶ Because gender acts as one of the cultural building blocks of life, then it seems these blocks can also be rearranged and reconfigured to include individuals who fall outside the binary. Contrary to Lorber, who mentions a society void of gender but looks further to the systemic causes of inequality, Monroe suggests a new concept of gender that intends to hold space for individuals who do not fall within the binary, gender pluralism.¹⁷ Monroe criticizes the poststructural perspective of gender that ignores the existence of an essential self and places the cause of gender strictly in the hands of social construction. Her discussion of poststructuralist trans theory suggests that she would not rule out the chance of self-essentialism linked to biology and psychology. Gender pluralism, as Monroe describes it, offers a spectrum of identities that allows for the inclusion of more than simply male and female. It holds space for intersex and trans people and those with multiple genders.¹⁸ She imagines the future of gender pluralism:

Some people would move between [gendered] positions, experiencing the fluidity and liminality that is described by poststructuralist transgender theorists. New sex and gender positions are likely to emerge, as liminality is names and becomes social categories. Gender categories would be inhabited in a way experienced mostly as fixed and essential but which could also be seen as constructed.¹⁹

¹⁵ "Beyond Male and Female: Poststructuralism and the Spectrum of Gender," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 8, no 1 (March 2005): 11. https://doi.org/10.1300/J485v08n01_02.

¹⁶ Monroe, 11..

¹⁷ Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, 293, and Monroe, 18-19.

¹⁸ Monroe, 18.

¹⁹ Monroe, 19.

While Monro imagines a future where all genders, essential to one's self and socially constructed, can be accepted and ever changing, Lorber looks further to the systems that reinforce inequality for all genders: "A more pragmatic goal (but ultimately equally radical) would be a society without economic inequities, racial distinctions, or sexual exploitation, since they are all implicated in the social production of gender inequality."²⁰ Lorber hypothesizes how to restructure the system in order to eliminate the inequality and injustice to reach an egalitarian society. Both Monro and Lorber urge for similar goals, with very different approaches to the solution.

However, Georgeiann Davis and Erin Murphy expose the main reason Monro's concept has yet to become a reality. They claim that trans and intersex people challenge the gender binary and more specifically, "pose a threat to its maintenance and perpetuation." They also recognize the conflict between intersex and transgender bodies and the political consequences they pose. For example, Davis and Murphy note that many intersex individuals urge others not to participate in surgery while transgender individuals depend on surgery to confirm their identities.²¹ Intersex individuals want control over their bodies because they are not afforded this autonomy many times, whereas trans individuals fight for the same autonomy, but in a different way. Involuntary surgery is often performed on intersex children immediately following birth to alter their anatomy to align with either male or female.²² Many times these individuals are unaware of these surgeries until much later in life when they enter puberty and do not have the same experiences as their classmates. Intersex individuals advocate control over their bodies by challenging the use of involuntary surgery on babies, whereas trans individuals urge for

²⁰ Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, 293.

²¹ "Intersex Bodies as States of Exception: An Empirical Explanation for Unnecessary Surgical Modification," *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 2 (2013): 130. (PROQuest Central)

²² Davis and Murphy, 137.

control over their bodies by having the freedom to alter their bodies through surgery that will affirm their gender. Both populations challenge the binary while also working within the binary framework.

The binary has been reinforced by gender norms and gender roles that both uphold and reinforce power structures associated with it. By questioning the binary, these structures also fall into question. Monro contends that a commonly-heard suggestion to erode the power behind gender is simply to eliminate gender altogether. Those who propose to eliminate the social construction of gender contend doing so will resolve the inequality between men and women, while also providing space to transgender persons. Monro contests this approach, noting that trans people depend heavily on the binary for it to be eliminated altogether. Although trans people challenge the standard idea of the gender binary, they also accept the constraints of male and female because these are the constraints under which they live. Instead, Monro seems to contend that rather than challenging the binary, trans persons should focus on the power structures that benefit from the level of inequality associated with the binary.²³ These structures include sport organizations and large corporations that rely on the binary to determine pay, employment opportunities, and importantly, who gets to play and under what conditions. Monro urges trans persons, and other sexually marginalized individuals, to strategically work within these systems of oppression. She envisions that these groups of people can redefine the systems through their resistance to the systems and the restructuring of social structures.²⁴

The secondary status of women was established by the social construction of gender and is a learned trait by all genders. Recall Agnes, the trans woman discussed by West and Zimmerman. Agnes studied how to be a woman, including learning feminine mannerisms,

²³ Monro, 12.

²⁴ Monro, 12.

personality, outward appearance, and language.²⁵ These were traits she had to learn in order to pass in public as a woman. Her identity was confirmed by other individuals who also saw her as a woman because she expressed the necessary signifiers associated with women.²⁶ The problem with this is that trans women must learn traits that inherently support the secondary status of women, such as submission and femininity, because these are directly associated with the female subject. Thus, the cycle of secondary status will continue until the concept of woman can include traits that uplift this population. Lorber contends that all individuals, not only transgender persons, perform gender that incorporates traits associated with weakness of females.²⁷ Cis and trans women participate in this gender performance and must learn how to be a woman, as their society has defined her. Even though members of the trans community utilize the gender binary (because no other options are yet socially acceptable), they largely remain excluded from the cisgender community. As previously noted, West and Zimmerman identified that this exclusion stems from the anatomy of a trans individual rather than their outward gender expression.²⁸

Another scholar who analyzes the concepts of gender and sport, Ken Saltman, explains that bodybuilders present an interesting parallel between male and female construction and challenge the very argument on which trans people are excluded. Saltman specifically studies male bodybuilders who “take artificial hormones, use dyes on their skin” and go to many other harsh extremes in order to become “real men” in this sporting category.²⁹ Saltman describes the male bodybuilder: “Male bodybuilders are hyper-masculine. They are more masculine than masculine, and this extremity undermines itself. Masculinity stretched to its limits begins to fray,

²⁵ “Doing Gender,” 1987, 134.

²⁶ “Doing Gender,” 1987, 134.

²⁷ Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, 14.

²⁸ 2009, 118.

²⁹ “Men with Breasts,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Gender in Sports and Physical Activity*, eds. Paul Davis and Charlene Weaving (New York: Routledge, 2010), 102.

transmutating itself into the feminine but also the neutered.” These extremes often cause the men to develop breasts, whereas female bodybuilders tend to lose their breasts during training. The anatomical make up of these bodybuilders challenges the standards set for men’s and women’s bodies. Alternatively, Saltman notes that “female bodybuilders who take steroids and undergo the regimens and push the practice to its limit become masculine and then also enter this neutered zone.”³⁰ Saltman argues that the gender binary collapses within bodybuilding because of the demands of the sport. Moreover, the sport’s governing organization accepts this as part of the culture and success of bodybuilding. But rather than understanding this as a collapse of the binary, it seems as if the binary has been reconsidered and altered to account for the variety of bodies competing in bodybuilding. More importantly, bodybuilding draws into question why some bodies are allowed to differ from the traditional notions of male and female while others, such as trans bodies, are not given this opportunity.³¹

Shelly McGrath and Ruth Chananie-Hill also conducted a study with female bodybuilders to better understand how these athletes experienced gender while participating in such a complex sport. The two found that bodybuilding fosters a much different model of woman, so that female bodybuilders held different standards for themselves: “When their most important reference groups become other bodybuilders and contest judges, many women bodybuilders shift their internal ideas of what the ‘ideal’ body should look like to one with more muscularity.”³² The internal idea to which McGrath and Chananie-Hill refer are the socially constructed definitions of women reinforced and reproduced within sporting society for years. Although this challenge to the accepted social construction of gender suggests an optimistic

³⁰ Saltman, 104.

³¹ Saltman, 104.

³² “‘Big Freaky-Looking Women’: Normalising Gender Transgression Through Bodybuilding,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 28, (2009): 236. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.26.2.235>.

future for the female bodybuilders, McGrath and Chananie-Hill witnessed extensive defensive othering and opposition to looking *too* muscular.³³ The two reported, “Although our interviewees rebel against traditional feminine gender norms in various ways, they all draw the line somewhere between ‘beautiful,’ muscular, ‘natural’ women . . . and women who are ‘disgusting,’ ‘all veiny and steroidal,’ . . . ‘unnatural,’ ‘hulking’ . . . and ‘freaky.’”³⁴

It is evident that the resistance to embracing highly muscular bodies for female athletes remains strong even in one of the most muscular of sports. Both McGrath and Chananie-Hill and Saltman found faults within the sport of bodybuilding. As Saltman states, “If our bodies are a site of struggle against gender normalization, then it would seem that the development of alternative and multiple ‘feminine’ beauty forms would contest the one dominant version of female beauty.”³⁵ But as one of McGrath and Chananie-Hill’s interviewees pointed out, the dance between femininity and muscularity is the only way to be a successful female bodybuilder. The authors wrote, “In the world of bodybuilding, it is insufficient for a woman to be *only* muscular or *only* feminine -- she must be *both/and*.”³⁶ Perhaps this is the case for male bodybuilders as well.

How does bodybuilding apply to the theoretical framing of gender identity and binary concerning transgender athletes? Bodybuilding celebrates individuals who intentionally fall outside the gender binary strongly supported within sports. Furthermore, these athletes blur the lines between male and female but not to the extent that spectators and judges begin to question their sex or gender.³⁷ As Saltman notes, “while bodybuilding, in some ways, reinforces gendered body norms and maintains the lines between gender categories, it also subverts itself, creating

³³ McGrath and Chananie, 247-248.

³⁴ McGrath and Chananie, 250.

³⁵ Saltman, 108.

³⁶ McGrath and Chananie, 250.

³⁷ McGrath and Chananie, 239.

gender confusion, blurring the lines between gender and sexual categories, and even making a whole new category.”³⁸ He continues to comment on the lack of international recognition of bodybuilding on television, suggesting that much of the sports world is not as comfortable with the gender confusion common in bodybuilding.³⁹ Although Saltman recognizes this lack of acceptance, it seems that bodybuilding can be a catalyst for the conversation of including transgender people in sports. The lines of the gender binary are blurred within this sport, therefore the issue with transgender athletes perhaps does not lie within the binary but at the contestation of altering one’s sex assigned at birth. Why does the sport establishment allow space for bodybuilders who obviously participate in questionable acts, such as taking testosterone and other hormones, but exclude transgender athletes who have also changed their bodies? Furthermore, why are bodybuilders praised for crossing the boundaries of gender, while transgender athletes are ridiculed for the same?

Trans athlete Renee Richards entered the world of female tennis in 1976, having competed many years prior as Richard Raskind. Richards disrupted the tennis world and, as Susan Birrell and Cheryl Cole claim, “created confusion and controversy for the players, the fans, organized tennis, and the public.”⁴⁰ Although the controversy surrounding the case of Renee Richards greatly stems from the imbalance of athletic ability between her and her female competitors, it can also be traced to the challenging of the gender binary and constructed image of women that Richards did not necessarily meet.⁴¹ Richards presents a complicated case of

³⁸ Saltman, 99.

³⁹ Saltman, 105.

⁴⁰ “Double Fault: Renee Richards and the Construction and Naturalization of Difference,” in *Women, Media and Sport: Challenging Gender Values* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1994), 208.

⁴¹ Birrell and Cole also investigate the power dynamics between trans individuals who seek gender affirming surgery and the doctors, who most often are males during the 1970s, who hold the power to provide this surgery or not. They note that the gender inequality within the medical industry directly correlates to the construction of gender, especially for trans individuals: “The successful male candidate for sex reassignment surgery, for example, must demonstrate stereotypical female behavior patterns and attitudes to the men who hold the power to reconstruct

gender because she publicly discussed the use of gender norms to achieve affirmation of her identity. Although, as discussed, the trans population depends on these gender norms, Richards was vocal about the secondary status of women and supported this concept. However controversial, Richards was one of the first transgender athletes to openly compete and became the center of media discussions. She upset the tennis world and sparked conversations concerning gender and performance of trans athletes. Birrell and Cole note that support for Richards mainly came from former male teammates and friends, including Gene Scott and Bobby Riggs. The rest of the tennis world questioned Richards' motives, the validity of her gender, and her eligibility to compete against other women.⁴²

Before transgender and intersex athletes started disrupting the traditional notions of gender within sports, female athletes were also considered a threat to sports and the binary of gender. For years female athletes were pressured to stifle their athletic ability so as not to impinge on the status of the superior male athlete. Female athletes such as Althea Gibson, Billie Jean King, and Babe Didrikson Zaharias, among many others, had to compete against the belief that women could not succeed in sports while also maintaining the standards held for women during their time. Their battles on and off the court against society's expectations were stepping stones in the greater fight towards gender equality. Gibson's career peaked in the 1950s when she faced ridicule for not only her gender but also her race. King was part of a larger movement in women's tennis during the 1960s fighting for equal pay and recognition. Gibson, King, and Zaharias were public figures who spoke out against the misogynistic environment of sports

his body" (210). They also claim that the media, also very exclusively male employed, played a significant role in the construction of Renee Richards to the rest of the world. Birrell and Cole reference the "transsexual empire" which includes "surgeons, lawyers and psychologists," all of which hold decision making power concerning the future for trans individuals (211).

⁴² 215.

during each of their respective eras. Their athletic milestones helped pave the way for the women's rights movement of the 1970s.

By this time, feminism had become a buzz word and commotion was stirring amongst young women who were aching for equality. However, Judith Butler identifies the inconsistencies within feminism that not only threatened the use of identity politics but also reinforced the oppression women were facing during the early days of the women's movement. She mentions that feminism's urgency to create a universal image of woman essentially has become feminism's Achilles heel: "Is the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations? And is not such reification precisely contrary to feminist aims?"⁴³ Butler, along with many other scholars, raise an important question: "What makes a woman?"

For many years, transphobic women have organized under the guise of feminism to promote hateful and dangerous rhetoric. This group of people is often referred to as TERFs or Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists. Michelle Goldberg offers a look at the history of TERF's and what led to this great disconnect within feminism. As she notes, the controversy began in the 1970s at the height of the women's movement in America when radical feminists were very vocal about their definition of "woman," which did not include trans women whatsoever. TERFs started holding conferences to meet other radical feminist from around the country.⁴⁴ These conferences still persist today amidst strong opposition from intersectional feminists who see TERFs as a group harmful overall to feminism. Samantha Allen, author and academic, writes extensively on trans experiences and what it is like to be trans and queer in America. In a 2013

⁴³ "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 7.

⁴⁴ "What is a Woman? The Dispute Between Radical Feminism and Transgenderism," *The New Yorker* (July 18, 2014): Accessed July 10, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/04/woman-2>.

article, she calls out TERFs for their misguided hatred and their harmful rhetoric that, for years, has impacted the acceptance of transgender persons among feminists. Allen contests, “There are not two sides to a debate about whether a group of people should exist,” and continues to note the attack on trans persons seemingly goes unchallenged in feminist circles but if the tables were turned and this rhetoric was directed towards gay and lesbian individuals, a mass of people would show up to protest and silence the hatred. She highlights the disconnect between gender identity and sexual attraction that often results in an imbalance of treatments towards trans individuals and other sexual minorities. Allen also noted, “The shameful secret at the heart of TERF politics is that their commitment to sex difference is actually a commitment to the very thing they want to destroy: gender.”⁴⁵ By destroying gender, many radical feminists believe that inequality will disappear as well. But as already discussed, the roots of gender inequality run far too deep for the elimination of gender to be a quick fix.

Both Butler and Lorber discuss the possibility of an inclusive feminism that holds space for the trans population. Judith Lorber noted, in the late nineteenth century the main signifier of womanhood was the ability to bear children.⁴⁶ She contests this simplistic view, “Menstruation, lactation, and gestation do not demarcate women from men. Only some women are pregnant and then only some of the time; some women do not have a uterus or ovaries.”⁴⁷ Lorber’s concept of woman suggests that she includes the trans population. Judith Butler echoes the sentiments of Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of woman which also included sexual minorities such as trans women: “Beauvoir is clear that one ‘becomes’ a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one. And clearly, the compulsion does not come from ‘sex.’ There is nothing in her

⁴⁵ “CounterPunch and the War on Transgender People,” *Jacobin* (July 10, 2013): Accessed July 10, 2020. <https://jacobinmag.com/2013/07/counterpunch-and-the-war-on-the-transgendered/>.

⁴⁶ Lorber, “Believing is Seeing,” 569.

⁴⁷ Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, 7.

account that guarantees that the ‘one’ who becomes a woman is necessarily female.”⁴⁸ Although this in good in theory, how does one apply this in the twenty-first century when many transgender athletes face discrimination and exclusion from sports? To bridge the gap between application and these optimistic theories, one must first understand the complicated history of gender within sports and their effect on the athletic identity.

Athletes Billie-Jean King and Babe Didrikson Zaharias were both highly successful athletes who received harsh ridicule from fans and sports leagues for their elevated levels of athletic ability. Zaharias competed at this level in the 1930s, while King turned professional in the 1950s. Although they had twenty-plus years between their athletic careers, the discrimination towards female athletes did not diminish within that time. The sports world was excited about the level of play both of these athletes could compete at; however, it also worked to hinder this success to a very specific level. The male sports establishment set the standards. Female athletes were encouraged to lose gracefully, not devote their entire lives to sports, and stifle their success and instead focus on marriage and children. Both King and Zaharias considered “athlete” to be a major component of their identities. They both started playing tennis and golf, respectively, at a very young age and soared to success over their teammates and competitors. As previously mentioned, Iris Young noted the contradiction between being an athlete and a woman, so that one can never be wholly female and wholly athlete at the same time, at least according to accepted gender norms in sports.⁴⁹ Once a female athlete crosses that threshold from feminine to masculine, many things fall into question such as their biological makeup, their sexuality, and their gender.

⁴⁸ Butler, “Subjects,” 11.

⁴⁹ Iris Young, “The Exclusion of Women from Sport,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Gender in Sports and Physical Activity*, eds. Paul Davis and Charlene Weaving (New York: Routledge, 2010):15.

The contradiction between female athletes and the athletic identity can be traced to the systems that define the normative elite athlete as male. Bruce Kidd explains the role sports play in crafting such identity: “The preferences we express for different sports and positions within sports (e.g. individual vs. team, body contact vs. non-body contact, or games requiring spontaneous creativity vs. those relying upon set plays) are in part statements about what we value ‘in a man’ and what sort of relations we want to encourage between men.”⁵⁰ Contact sports such as football or wrestling are examples of brute strength where men must show their level of aggression and muscularity in order to dominate other men. These types of sports also reinforce the hegemonic masculinity that is, unfortunately, a key component in the identity of male athletes. Some contact sports available to women maintain much stricter rules considering contact in order to protect the athletes and their femininity. Alternatively, rugby maintains the same standards for male and female athletes.⁵¹ Both Kidd and Matthew Ezzell, a scholar who observed performance of gender within the female rugby environment, speak to the imbalance between treatment of male and female athletes and how the system is rigged to benefit one sex over the other. Kidd continues with, “Given the inordinate pressure to win, the emphasis upon measurable achievement as opposed to intrinsic satisfaction and aesthetic creativity, and the well-established dependence of the commercial sports upon male audiences, hegemonic masculinity in sports has been difficult to combat.”⁵² Kidd not only recognizes the homophobia imbedded within male sports, he also understands the threat that successful female athletes and

⁵⁰ “The Men’s Cultural Centre,” in *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order*, ed. Michael Messner and Donald Sabo (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Books, 1990): 37.

⁵¹ Matthew Ezzell observed a female rugby team to determine the relationship of gender within this specific group of athletes. The struggle between femininity and athletic identity led the athletes to reinforce stereotypes of athletic women. Although the athletes recognized the stereotypes of ‘lesbian’ and ‘butch’ that are associated with muscular female athletes, they also exhibited signs of defensive othering by referring to other female athletes by these terms. Although not pertinent to this research, it is interesting that Ezzell found these female rugby players demonstrated many of the traits that historically women have fought against in the world of sports.

⁵² Kidd, 37.

transgender athletes can pose to this institutionalized concept: “At the deepest psychological levels, the blurring of sex roles undermines not only the male-privileging sexual division of labour but also the very process by which males raised within sexually segregated sports have gained personal validation and confidence.”⁵³ In the same light, Iris Young discussed female athletes who have worked in an environment that fostered the mindset of weakness and inferiority.⁵⁴ Female athletes cannot be overly masculine nor can they express outrage for fear of stepping outside the feminine boundaries. This mindset paired with the hegemonic masculinity, to which Kidd refers, demonstrates great gaps between the treatment of male and female athletes, and now transgender and intersex athletes. The gap is reinforced by the standards set across all sporting platforms: media outlets, coaching staff, team names, television coverage, and more.

Who Gets to Be an Elite Athlete?

Sports play an influential role in reinforcing a specific definition of woman. Because the historical foundation of sports in the Western world was built upon the male body, its biological make up, and its capabilities, women with muscular physiques tend to fall under harsh scrutiny because they contradict the socially constructed standard of femininity expected of them.⁵⁵ Sports used these historical foundations as a standard by which to measure all female athletes and limit their participation. Furthermore, the inclusion of women within the world of sports has been a long, tiresome fight and one that continues still today. Iris Young emphasizes that women have been failed by sports in the past: “The absence of institutionalized sport for girls and women, coupled with the active sanction against their physical activity that girls often experience, does much to develop in [women] a sense of ourselves as weak, frail, sedentary.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Kidd, 39.

⁵⁴ Young, 15.

⁵⁵ Lorber, “Believing is Seeing,” 572.

⁵⁶ Iris Young, 15.

Much like Young, Ezzell discusses the development of identities under an oppressive umbrella: “Race, class, and gender . . . are interlocking systems of oppression; moreover, they are the social arrangements from which we derive our core identities.”⁵⁷ Therefore, the inequality that persists in society, and sports overall, continues to play a significant role in the identity of young athletes.

Young describes the creation of identities for women in sports: “If there is a particular female person participating in sport, either she is not ‘really’ a woman, or the sport she engages in is not ‘really’ a sport.”⁵⁸ Therefore, either women are not made for sports or sports are not made for women. Young addresses the widely-held assumption that men are superior at sports compared to women. Lois Bryson agrees with Young, “People tend to accept without question that men are far better at sport than women because men are stronger, faster, and tougher. If it were not important to be skillful, strong, fast, and in particular, tough, this misconception would not matter.”⁵⁹ Judith Lorber also discusses the ways in which sports depend on the secondary status of women to support the level of inequality female athletes must face: “In professional and collegiate sports, physiological differences are invoked to justify women’s secondary status, despite the clear evidence that gender status overrides physiological capabilities.” Lorber highlights the underlying issue that no matter how successful female athletes are, men still receive higher praise simply because they are men.⁶⁰

Scholars such as Young, Lorber, Bryson and Ezzell recognize the conflict between female athletes and the socially accepted image of women that reinforces the idea that women are

⁵⁷ Matthew Ezzell, “‘Barbie Dolls’ on the Pitch: Identity Work, Defensive Othering, and Inequality in Women’s Rugby,” *Social Problems* 56, no. 1 (February 2009): 111. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2009.56.1.111>.

⁵⁸ Young, 15.

⁵⁹ “Challenges to Male Hegemony in Sport,” in *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order*, ed. Michael Messner and Donald Sabo (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Books, 1990), 173.

⁶⁰ Lorber, “Believing is Seeing,” 571.

physically and mentally inferior to men. Another scholar, Shari Dworkin spoke with women working out at a public gym to document their opinions on women and muscular strength. Her findings show that although women were highly interested in gaining strength and muscle, this had a specific limit placed upon it: “Based on the tensions between what bodies *should* do, what bodies *actually* do, and culturally shifting standards of emphasized femininity, approximately three-fourths of the women at the fitness sites expressed an awareness of an upper limit on the quest for muscular size and strength.”⁶¹ Dworkin observed that many of the women at the fitness center expressed a fear of losing their femininity if they were to gain too much muscle.⁶² The limitation set for female athletic bodies has been reinforced throughout sports for so many years that it is now assumed to be the standard. Not only does the sporting environment limit women’s bodies, women limit their own bodies based on the gender norms assigned to this gender. This is just one of the many factors that contribute to the assumption that men are superior at sports compared to women.

Investigative reporter and author David Epstein studied the human body in order to understand exactly which factors create an elite athlete and how these influence the understanding of gender within sports. Although cultural influences play a role in the creation of a great athlete, Epstein contends that culture can only go so far.⁶³ He discusses a study comparing Australian Aboriginal children to American children, along with other countries around the world. The gap in throwing distances and speed between boys and girls was much smaller in the Aboriginal group compared to the American group. Epstein suggests that the environment in which the Aboriginal children were raised required the young boys and girls to

⁶¹ “‘Holding Back’: Negotiating a Glass Ceiling on Women’s Muscular Strength,” *Sociological Perspectives* 44, no. 3 (September 2001): 345. (JSTOR)

⁶² Dworkin, 334.

⁶³ *The Sports Gene: Inside the Science of Extraordinary Athletic Performance* (New York: Penguin Group, 2014). 61.

throw objects in order to hunt and to fight.⁶⁴ Although the Aboriginal children threw farther than American children, the study conducted by Jerry et. al. showed that “many girls could throw as effectively and efficiently as boys.”⁶⁵ This study not only observed throwing distances and speed but it also looked at the bodily movements when the young girls and boys were throwing. The researchers found biological differences between the two groups which greatly impacted how they threw the ball. Epstein and other researchers found that both cultural and biological factors can impact a person’s athletic ability.

Much like Epstein, Michael Bostwick and Michael Joyner discussed the many factors that impact an athlete’s success. They identified biological influences but also cultural influences. They referenced runners from East Africa who have trained at higher altitudes and eaten lower calorie diets which both result in bodies much better equipped for running.⁶⁶ They noted the distinction between cultural and biological influences, “the genetic substrate by itself remains elusive, nonspecific, and insufficient to explain the making of a champion.”⁶⁷

In contrast to cultural and biological impacts, both Ezzell and Young contend that more important than cultural or biological differences that contribute to gender differences in performances are the system biases that favor certain male physical attributes. As Young noted, “The most celebrated and most practised sports put a premium on height, mass, strength, and speed -- attributes in which on the average men will tend to excel over women.”⁶⁸ Additionally, when comparing men and women athletes, Ezzell suggested that the system values men’s bodies and accomplishments, “This does not mean that men are inherently better athletes. It only means

⁶⁴ Epstein, 61.

⁶⁵ Jerry Thomas, Jacqueline Alderson, Katherin Thomas, Amity Campbell, and Bruce Elliot, “Developmental Gender Differences for Overhand Throwing in Aboriginal Australian Children,” *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 81, no. 4 (Dec. 2010): 440. (ProQuest)

⁶⁶ “The Limits of Acceptable Biological Variation In Elite Athletes: Should Sex Ambiguity Be Treated Differently From Other Advantageous Genetic Traits?” *Mayo Clinic*. June 2012, 87 (6): 510.

⁶⁷ Bostwick and Joyner, 510.

⁶⁸ Young, 18.

that what is valued in sports reflects the premium put on size, strength, and masculine behavior.”⁶⁹ Sports perpetuate and reproduce the idea that men are superior athletes although internally, male and female bodies are very similar.

As David Epstein explains, “differences between men and women are extremely small, limited to the single chromosome that is either X in women or Y in men.”⁷⁰ He also notes, “The trouble is that human biology simply does not break down into male and female as politely as sport’s governing body wish it would.”⁷¹ Prime examples are Maria Jose Martínez-Patiño and Caster Semenya. Both of these athletes experienced public ridicule and exposure as their biological make-up fell into question after surprisingly successful performances on the track. After Martínez-Patiño forgot paperwork that verified she was a woman prior to competing in the 1985 World University Games, she had to undergo a test to confirm her sex. The genetic test results showed that Martínez-Patiño’s had XY chromosomes. Although it would seem that her athletic success stemmed from the elevated levels of testosterone in her system, Martínez-Patiño had androgen insensitivity.⁷² As Epstein notes, androgen insensitivity meant that her body “was deaf to the call of testosterone,” produced by testes hidden in her labia, so that she could not use any of that testosterone.⁷³ Martínez-Patiño’s athletic career was tainted by the public campaign against her valid identity. Caster Semenya, a South-African runner, experienced a very similar public trial concerning her identification as a woman. Semenya made front page news when she blew running records out of the water at the 2009 World Championships.⁷⁴ Her name remained in the news as questions began to circulate concerning the validity of her biological sex as a born

⁶⁹ Ezzell, 124.

⁷⁰ Epstein, 61.

⁷¹ Epstein, 58.

⁷² Epstein, 56-58.

⁷³ Epstein, 58.

⁷⁴ Cooky and Dworkin, 37.

female. Skeptics could not believe that a biologically defined woman could run as fast as Semenya. Although the results of the Semenya's gender verification test were not made public, she was allowed to return to competing as a woman.⁷⁵

Each of the scholars whose works were examined in the current and previous sections identified challenges faced by female athletes. Although genetic differences play a key role in the physical ability of an athlete, the limitations set within sporting policies often benefit the male athlete. Athletes who fall within the gray areas such as intersex or transgender athletes stir up emotions of fear and confusion because they challenge the widely-accepted, socially constructed binary of strictly male and strictly female.

Sex Segregation Within Sports

One of the most consistent concerns with the inclusion of transgender and intersex athletes is the segregation of male and female sporting activities. The segregation within sports is an attempt to create a level playing field amongst athletes, which in turn depends on the differences in physical capabilities between men and women. Furthermore, sex segregation of sports also intends to protect female athletes from physical harm that may occur when playing against men. While physically protecting female athletes may hold some validity, many academics consider other theories for sex segregation. Harper et. al. argue, "The intention for separating athletes into male and female categories is to provide women athletes with meaningful competition."⁷⁶ John Gleaves and Tim Lerhbach examine how sex segregation in sports impacts the transgender community much differently than the cisgender community: "Athletes who simply by happenstance conform to one of two socially established genders, face no questions about their

⁷⁵ Cooky and Dworkin, 49.

⁷⁶ Joanna Harper, Maria-Jose Martínez-Patiño, Fabio Pigozzi, and Yannis Pitsiladis, "Implications of a Third Gender for Elite Sports," *Current Sports Medicine Reports* 17, no. 2 (February 2018): 43.
<https://doi.org/10.1249/JSR.0000000000000455>.

participation nor any burden to prove they belong in gender-segregated sport. Their status as ‘normal ’entitles them to participate while those who are ‘not normal ’must prove that they fit in.”⁷⁷ One could argue this is similar to the battle women faced when attempting to enter the sporting arena when they were also excluded based on gender norms and assumptions. Gleaves and Lerhbach also explain that the exclusion of transgender athletes is based upon very little evidence of physiological differences that justify such exclusion.

Lois Bryson adds a compelling component to the discussion of sex segregation in sports: “The distancing of males from females [in sports] can thus be understood to be an urgent and emphasized reaction based on some uncertainty and even anxiety about the development of a masculine personality [in female competitors].”⁷⁸ Masculinity is praised in men for fear of young boys developing feminine characteristics and therefore undermining the socially constructed standard set for men. Moreover, this looming standard also exists for female athletes who are taught to hinder their masculine characteristics for fear of appearing to manly and therefore disrupting the female image. Bryson alludes to the development of masculinity for male athletes and the resultant anxiety produced among male athletes, but certainly this anxiety exists around this development for women as well. Male athletes are taught at a very young age to suppress femininity, on and off the court, which stirs anxiety about the standards they must meet as an athlete.

Not only do sports focus on developing men’s masculinity, but they also focus on hindering the development of masculinity within women. Schwalbe et. al. offer a sociological perspective that can be applied to the segregation of women and men within sports: “Preserving inequality requires maintaining boundaries between dominant and subordinate groups . . . By

⁷⁷ “Beyond Fairness: The Ethics Of Inclusion For Transgender And Intersex Athletes,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 43, no. 2 (2016): 314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2016.1157485>.

⁷⁸ Bryson, 179.

preserving these boundaries, dominant groups protect the material and cultural capital they have acquired and upon which they rely to preserve their dominance.”⁷⁹ Perhaps Harper et. al. raise a valid point concerning the “meaningful competition” for female athletes but academics and feminist must look beyond this surface level perspective.⁸⁰ Schwalbe et. al.’s understanding seems to suggest that sex segregation works to maintain the elite status of male athletes and prohibits female athletes from reaching a similar or equal status. Gender segregation thus becomes just one of the many tactics used against women to maintain their subordination to men.

Many scholars defend sex segregation in sports based on the assumption that men and women are different physiologically. However, Epstein and other scholars have noted that these differences are not as vast as many may have assumed. This research does not intend to argue that sports should not be segregated, but rather, that the segregation within sports has been upheld for reasons other than biological differences between men and women. Instead, segregation protects the masculine nature of male sports and prevents the encroachment of women into such territory. Not only has this segregation negatively impacted the athletic experiences of female athletes, but also that of transgender and intersex athletes. The misunderstanding that all male athletes should be masculine and all female athletes should be feminine draws a distinct line between these two sexes while ignoring the possibility for any other individuals, including trans and intersex people. Female athletes who display masculine features fall under scrutiny as critics question their gender and their sex. Athletes such as Caster Semenya and Maria Jose Martínez-Patiño do not fit nicely within the socially constructed categories of masculine and feminine and therefore were publicly investigated. Sex segregation

⁷⁹ Michael Schwalbe, Sandra Godwin, Daphne Holden, Douglas Schrock, Shealy Thompson, and Michelle Wolkomir, “The Reproduction of Inequality: An Interactionist Analysis,” in *Reading Between the Lines: Toward an Understanding of Current Social Problems*, ed. Amanda Konradi and Martha Schmidt (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004): 50.

⁸⁰ Harper, 43.

intends to separate male and female athletes but does so under the misunderstanding that male and female athletes differ greatly concerning their masculinity and femininity.

Judith Lorber expresses her sentiments towards sex segregation in sports: “This practice sounds fair only because it is assumed that all men are similar in size and strength and different from all women.”⁸¹ Although Lorber notes the minimal physical differences between men and women, she also acknowledges the similarities shared between these two groups of people: “I am not saying that physical differences between male and female bodies don’t exist, but that these differences are socially meaningless until social practices transform them into social facts.”⁸² As mentioned, Epstein argues that the differences between men and women are rather minimal in the grand scheme of things but still recognizes the importance of these differences.⁸³ Yet, the sports world seems to ignore these facts.

Transgender athletes complicate the practice of sex segregation within sports even further because they not only challenge the gender binary (while working within the binary constraints), but they blur the lines between male and female through hormonal treatments. The main component in this debate is the level of testosterone coursing through each athlete’s body and the effect it has on their success as an athlete. Epstein noted that testosterone seems to be one of the key components to the success of an elite athlete.⁸⁴ Although his research focuses on the athletic body and more specifically, whether or not a sports gene exists, he recognizes that not all individuals will become elite athletes in their lifetimes.⁸⁵ Epstein references athletes such as Pam Reed (ultrarunner), Floyd Mayweather (boxer), and Stefan Holm (high jumper) all of whom can be classified as elite athletes, as individuals who also have hyper levels of dedication and

⁸¹ Lorber, “Believing is Seeing,” 570.

⁸² Lorber, “Believing is Seeing,” 576.

⁸³ Epstein, 61.

⁸⁴ Epstein, 70.

⁸⁵ Epstein, 237.

perhaps addiction to their sports. Rather than simply addressing their testosterone levels, Epstein credits their level of success to their bodies' reaction to the competition within their sports.⁸⁶

Yet Epstein, along with medical researchers Louis Gooren and Mathijs Bunck, support upholding the practice of sex segregation in sport.

What is most significant among all these conversations is the acknowledgment of hormone variation from person to person. Epstein, Gooren, and Bunck all note that individual bodies react differently to the level of hormones produced by their bodies. Recall Caster Semenya and María José Martínez-Patiño, who both had elevated levels of testosterone, but yet whose bodies reacted very differently from one another. Some bodies can process testosterone; some have heightened levels of testosterone but cannot access this for physical advantages, while other bodies have characteristics common to both men and women. Although bodies vary, sports do not seem to recognize nor allow for such variations creating unsafe and isolating environments for transgender and intersex athletes.

Conclusion

Many scholars, including those discussed here, acknowledge and dissect the construction of gender and its history within the world of sports. Much like other aspects of everyone's daily lives, the gender binary within sports has become the assumed standard. Those who challenge the standards are then viewed as foolish or undermining the integrity of sports. To the extreme, this includes transgender athletes; however, female athletes also challenge the traditional foundations of sports. Both groups stand to benefit from a reconstruction of gender within sports. For decades, feminists have fought for equal rights for women. This fight should also include equal rights for trans and intersex individuals who live underneath the same oppressive umbrella.

⁸⁶ Epstein, 238.

This research hopes to highlight other areas of opportunity that can improve the lives of transgender athletes and act as stepping stones towards challenging the binary norms within sports.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This research consists of a mixed methods approach, utilizing qualitative and quantitative measures. Qualitative research allowed me to speak with members of the transgender community and who shared their personal experiences as athletes. Current literature by and large fails to include the experiences and voices of the transgender population. It was important to speak with individuals in the transgender community to bridge this gap and to better understand their personal experiences within the athletic environment. Qualitative research also provided a platform to explore and analyze the lived experiences of transgender athletes. In addition to qualitative interviews, this research utilized quantitative surveys by gathering information from a sample of high school athletic coaches throughout the state of Tennessee through a short survey. In order to ensure an ethical study and to maintain a professional relationship with all participants, the research protocol was submitted and approved by East Tennessee State University's Institutional Review Board.

The survey gathered data on the high school coaches' views on their experiences with transgender athletes, as well as their concerns for proposed state House Bill 1572 requiring athletes to compete with their sex assigned at birth¹ and their expectations for the future. House Bill 1572 was introduced in the Tennessee General Assembly in December of 2019. The introduction of bill was part of a larger wave of legislation recently introduced in states across the U.S including Georgia, Washington State, New Hampshire, Missouri, and Alabama. Not only would HB 1572 threaten the inclusion of transgender athletes, the school that ignores this ruling (if it were to pass) would face a fine up to \$10,000.² It is evident that a wave of transphobic legislation began to sweep the nation late in 2019, and continued into early 2020. Although the

¹ "HB 1572 Summary."

² "HB 1572 Summary."

proposed bill in Tennessee does not overtly mention the exclusion of transgender athletes, this is certainly the subtext. Therefore, this research is not only timely but imperative to understand what the future may be for transgender athletes.

Rationale for Research Design

I had to discover the best way to talk respectfully with transgender athletes while also connecting their stories with the complexities behind the proposal introduced in the Tennessee House of Representatives in late 2019. A mixed methods approach worked best to assess information from two groups of people: coaches and athletes. Although speaking with coaches individually would have been ideal, it was more important for this research to gather data that could represent the current opinions and perspectives held throughout the state of Tennessee by high school coaches. Surveys reached a large group of people, such as the high school coaches, while also providing ample information.

In addition to the surveys, qualitative interviews provided the opportunity to get to know each athlete individually and to gain an understanding of each one's history as an athlete through discovering the many experiences each athlete had throughout his or her life as a trans person. Lois Tyson is a Professor of English at Grand Valley State University who focuses on critical theory perspectives. Tyson notes that the queer community has been excluded from nearly every public arena throughout history and as a result heterosexism and heterocentrism have become the assumed norms. The term community used here includes all members of the LGBTQ+ population although, as mentioned, certain groups of this population have seen discrimination diminish more than others. Heterosexism and heterocentrism refer to the cultural assumption that the majority of members in society are heterosexual. Tyson contends that conditions such as

heterosexism and heterocentrism render the queer community invisible throughout society.³

Academic literature concerning the transgender population consistently mirrors the invisibility sparked by heterocentrism. In order to challenge the normative standard of heterocentrism, it was imperative that the qualitative interviews with trans people serve as the epicenter of this research. Not only to provide visibility and voice to this community but also to challenge the notion of heterocentrism that remains strong still today.

Phenomenological Research

The interviews included in this study utilized a phenomenological approach that also drew from Socratic influences. Phenomenological interviews aim to understand the lived experiences of individuals through open dialogue that tends to result in conversation rather than a question and answer session.⁴ This style of interviewing helped create a comfortable atmosphere for the participants who during the interviews described possible difficult moments from their lives. This research was strongly influenced by the insights of Kathryn Roulston, an Associate Professor in the Qualitative Research Program at the University of Georgia. In her book *Reflective Interviewing* she introduces Christine Sorrell Dinkins who details a form of phenomenological interviewing that focuses on the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee in an effort to deeply understand the concepts being discussed. The participants also tend to reflect and work together to reach common understandings and find new insights. This approach is called the “Socratic-Hermeneutic Inter-view.” As Roulston explains, “Dinkins rejects the neutral stance taken by phenomenological researchers seeking detailed stories about

³ “Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism,” in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 335, 320-321.

⁴ *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (California: SAGE Publications, 2013), 16.

specific experiences.”⁵ Although phenomenological influences were used during this research, the interview style more accurately represents the approach Dinkins described.

Phenomenological research was interpreted as an approach that intends to debunk stereotypes and study subjects in order to reach a more accurate and real understanding of their lives and experiences. Thomas Eberle and Bernt Schnettler further describe this concept, “Phenomenology and philosophical anthropology serve to explore those universal and invariant basic structure of human’s everyday life-world that has to be taken into consideration before any historical or empirical reconstruction can start.”⁶ The transgender community has not been offered a safe world in which to live for so many years. This has allowed stereotypes and unfounded assumptions, rather than accurate accounts, to define this community.

Phenomenological interviewing and research document the experiences and lives of underrepresented people so that further research can then be applied to these individuals in a sociological manner. Therefore, this research aimed to challenge stereotypes and rewrite inaccurate, biased accounts of trans lives.

Although the interviews stemmed from a list of questions, the actual process was much more conversational and free-flowing, as opposed to a simple question and answer session. They included a semi-structured approach by only relying on the interview questions for reference and instead allowed the interview to evolve. Many times throughout the interviews both the interviewee and researcher discussed certain topics, debated ideas, and eventually reached a common understanding of the concept at hand. Sometimes this discussion included clarification of ideas or terms and other times it included working together so both parties understood a concept more clearly. This approach resulted in very in-depth interviews that produced valuable

⁵ Roulston, 18.

⁶ "Phenomenology," in *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*, ed. P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J.W. Sakshaug, and R.A. Williams, 2019. SAGE Research Methods.

information. By allowing the interview participants to semi-guide the direction of the interview, I was able to document aspects and details that were most important to the participant. This process ensured that the trans individual being interviewed remained the central focus of this research, which was one the essential goals during this study.

Interview Participant Selection

The recruitment process for interview participants relied strongly on the use of social media sites and snowballing. Through outside observations, my research recognized how social media provide members of the transgender population community, support, and visibility. More importantly, social media can empower the transgender population because of how easily one can access to and be a part of the large transgender community online. This is especially important for trans individuals who may live in small, rural areas with very little diversity. The wide reaching span of the internet has the ability to connect marginalized individuals so they no longer feel invisible or alone but rather, united. More specifically to this research, transgender athletes utilize social media to discover community, while also gaining affirmation through the use of liking and sharing posts.

Many of the social media pages devoted to transgender athletes have a high number of followers. To reach as many individuals as possible, I posted the recruitment flyer on multiple social media platforms and sent it to the most popular pages through direct messages requesting that the facilitators share this post on their own pages in hopes of reaching the most people possible. The flyer asked, “Are you a transgender athlete 18 years or older? Would you like to participate in an interview for graduate research?” In addition to contacting pages with many followers, I shared this flyer on my own social media, thus allowing whomever to share the post

while also tagging other pages devoted to transgender athletes with large numbers of followers.⁷ The flyer instructed interested individuals to email the researcher directly for more information concerning the study. Five interested participants responded to the flyer. Each individual received the informed consent form stating this research was voluntary and that there were minimal risks involved; however every precaution possible was used to ensure their privacy during this study. This included maintaining anonymity with the interview participants by not asking their names, ages (other than having them agree that they were over 18), or location.

Although it was difficult to fully validate a person's eligibility to participate in these interviews, I used my best judgement during the interviews concerning their status as a trans person. There were few expectations that a person would participate in this research masquerading under a false identity. Although the internet and social media allow room for curated identities, I am confident that each person interviewed in this research did so as her/his/their true identity as a trans person and transgender athlete. Many of the athletes spoke about their transition and where they were in this process currently. They also discussed the age at which they recognized the body in which they were living did not match the gender with which they identified. Each athlete had personal insight into the challenges associated with being transgender in today's environment.

Qualitative Data Collection

I conducted the interviews by cellular device on an app called Google Voice. I chose this application because of its heightened level of privacy for both interview participants. Google Voice allows a person to send and receive calls through a secondary number provided by the app. For example, if a personal number is (123) 456-7891, the app would show this on caller ID

⁷ In this instance, tagging can be understood as including a person's page name in order for them to see the flyer and take notice of the message on the flyer. Multiple pages can be tagged in a single post. Once a person's page is tagged, she/he/they will receive a notification to ignore or accept.

as (759) 214-7895, or some other random order of numbers different than those in the actual phone number. This feature was pivotal in order to provide extra privacy and anonymity to the transgender people interviewed. Google Voice also allows recording of the phone calls completed through the app and are then converted into an MP3 file. Following the interviews, the conversations were transcribed and the MP3 recordings were then deleted for security purposed. In order to maintain the highest level of privacy for the interview participants, all signifiers were avoided at all costs and removed from the transcript files. Throughout the transcripts and this thesis each interview participant is identified as Athlete A, B, C, D, and E. This method maintained anonymity for the participants while still providing structure to the interviews and transcripts.

Survey Participant Selection

As noted above, in December of 2019 the Tennessee General Assembly introduced House Bill 1572. Republican representative Bruce Griffey introduced this bill that would require athletes participating in sports throughout Tennessee to compete in the gender category that reflects the sex they were assigned at birth.⁸ The Tennessee General Assembly website specifically states:

This bill requires elementary and secondary schools that receive public funding to ensure that student athletes participate in school-sanctioned sports based on the student's biological sex as indicated by the athlete's original birth certificate issued at birth. This bill prohibits a school from accepting revised or amended birth certificates for the purposes of athletic participation.⁹

If a school fails to comply with this ruling, it risks facing a \$10,000 penalty along with losing its eligibility for state and local public funding.¹⁰ In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Tennessee high school coaches' understanding and perception of this bill, I created a survey

⁸ "HB 1572 Summary."

⁹ "HB 1572 Summary."

¹⁰ "HB 1572 Summary."

that consisted of thirteen questions overall. Prior to survey distribution, I spoke with a representative of the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA) in order to confirm this type of research was possible and allowed under the organization's protocol. This individual offered enthusiasm for this research and added comments on the public nature of the TSSAA website and its information. Although the representative noted that the TSSAA could not assist in the distribution of this survey, he offered support and helpful direction for the success of this study.¹¹

Upon IRB approval, the survey was distributed to 30 high schools across the state. Names of schools were drawn at random from a pool of counties within Tennessee's three geographical regions called the Grand Divisions: East, Middle, and West.¹² Five counties were drawn from a hat from which each high school within those counties was then listed. From this list ten names were drawn from each region, resulting in thirty high schools overall. I emailed the survey to every athletic coach listed on the TSSAA website for each of the thirty high schools. The randomization of this process allowed the research to forego information such as socioeconomic factors, size of the school, and school demographics. Although these factors would be important in consideration of survey results, I did not want to compromise the results by inserting personal biases and assumptions. For instance, one might assume that a highly diverse high school would produce liberal opinions and therefore support the inclusion and affirmation of transgender athletes competing with their identity rather than assigned sex at birth. Had this been considered

¹¹ Matthew Gillespie, email correspondence with author, February 4, 2020.

¹² The Tennessee Historical Society website describes the historical divisions within Tennessee, "Though the Grand Divisions roughly divide the state into thirds, Middle Tennessee is the largest division with approximately 41 percent of the state's landmass. West Tennessee is bounded by the Mississippi River and the western Tennessee River valley and is the lowest-lying of the three divisions." These divisions are recognized geologically as well as legally. More information can be found at <https://tennesseehistory.org/grand-divisions/>.

this when choosing the high schools, the integrity of the survey research would be compromised. Random selection allowed the survey to represent an overview of the state of Tennessee.

Quantitative Surveys

The survey for this research was created through Qualtrics software. Qualtrics prides itself on its extreme security measures that not only protect the creator of the survey but also the survey participants. It is currently the only program that is FedRAMP Authorized and Health Information Trust Alliance (HITRUST) certified.¹³ These standards are necessary for individuals involved in governmental agencies or healthcare environments. This software provided extra security for participants since personal identifying information was not collected, including names, exact locations, or Internet Protocol (IP) addresses. Qualtrics also allowed me to customize the survey in order to analyze the results efficiently. The only questions the coaches were required to answer were:

1. Agreeing to terms which confirmed they were
 - a. at least 18 years of age
 - b. that they understood the survey was voluntary
 - c. they were a coach within a Tennessee high school.
2. Providing the age window in which they fall.
3. Providing the region in which their school resides (East, Middle, and West).

The questions following were optional for the coaches. See Appendix B for the survey questions.

Ethical Concerns

As mentioned above, this research worked closely with IRB to take every precaution necessary to uphold an ethical study. Ethics are of utmost importance in all research, but especially important during this study due to the nature of the topic and concerns for the safety of the transgender persons interviewed. At a time when a person's identity can cost them their job

¹³ "Qualtrics Security and Compliance," Qualtrics, Accessed June 8, 2020.
<https://www.qualtrics.com/platform/security/>.

and even worse their life, it was imperative to take each step of this research with caution and heightened awareness. This included small details such as recognizing a person's pronouns and using them consistently, to alerting the participants prior to asking difficult interview questions so the interview participant was prepared and could consider whether to answer or not. It was equally important that the interview participants have the platform to share their stories in a safe space without fear of their identity or safety being compromised.

There were also ethical concerns when conducting the quantitative survey that focused on the privacy of the participants. In order to maintain their anonymity, I did not ask any personal identifying information and curated the survey to not collect any IP addresses. This feature allowed the collection of information needed for the survey but not so much that answers could be traced to one single participant. Although the email addresses obtained for my research were publicly accessible through the TSSAA website, a copy of these were not retained nor was information concerning the high schools chosen for this study. As professionals in the state of Tennessee, it was understood that survey answers could compromise one's employment if names were leaked so these extra measures were imperative to uphold every participant's privacy.

Although the participants of this study were very forthcoming with their personal experiences, certain trans people questioned the intentions of this research. They wanted to know more about my personal identity and the influence behind this research. It was of utmost importance to respect these boundaries and not pressure anyone to participate in this research. Prior to each interview, I reviewed the informed consent with each athlete ensuring that each one understood the voluntary nature of this survey and the option to skip questions, pause, or stop the interview at any time.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

This research consisted of five phone interviews with transgender athletes. As mentioned, the interviews were conducted over phone, recorded, and later transcribed. The calls were scheduled between myself and each athlete to best accommodate schedules and different time zones. Table 1 breaks down each interview, the date it occurred, and the length of each interview.

Table 4.1: Interview details

Pseudonym	Date	Length of Interview
Athlete A	04/21/2020	01:28:23
Athlete B	05/07/2020	01:05:10
Athlete C	05/10/2020	01:20:17
Athlete D	05/11/2020	52:01
Athlete E	04/21/2020	01:19:37

Source: Phone interviews with athletes.

Coding

During the coding process, four main themes emerged within each of the five interviews. The themes included the importance of leaders in the lives of the athletes, anxiety surrounding restrooms or locker rooms, the importance of community for the transgender population, and the yearning to be an ambassador to other transgender individuals. Other topics were discussed by each athlete but these four main themes were the only topics that every athlete mentioned consistently during the interviews. Table 2 demonstrates how many times each athlete discussed these themes.

Table 4.2. Coding Interviews

Theme	Athlete A	Athlete B	Athlete C	Athlete D	Athlete E
Leadership	16	11	9	23	15
Restroom	14	6	5	6	4
Community	5	3	17	6	9
Ambassador	5	2	2	2	6

Source: Phone interviews with athletes.

Leadership proved to be the most important component for all five interviewees. Each athlete shared specific experiences where leaders, in the form of coaches, athletic directors, team captains, and fellow teammates, had made a positive difference in their lives as a transgender athlete. Although those who held the leadership positions differed for each athlete, all five interviewees depended on these individuals to be allies.

Restrooms and locker rooms proved to be a consistent area of discomfort for all five athletes. Some shared specific memories of these experiences, while others avoided the specifics altogether. These spaces are spaces of anxiety for the five transgender athletes interviewed. However, many also shared how these spaces can also provide refuge and support if they align with the gender identity of the athlete. This is an area where leaders can use their power to alleviate the anxiety around restrooms and locker rooms by offering gender neutral options and private areas.

Community was also a consistent theme throughout the interviews. Community looked a little bit different for each athlete. Some defined their community as supportive teammates while others referred to other transgender individuals as their community. Either way, these groups of supportive people made a lasting impact in the lives of the five transgender athletes. Not only can leaders help with the discomfort around restrooms and locker rooms, individuals within this

community can also act as allies. One athlete described how their friends would check the restroom prior to the athlete entering and stand outside in order to protect them from possible harm.

All five interviewees also displayed an urgent desire to be ambassadors to and for the transgender community. For some, being an ambassador includes sharing their stories through blogs or interviews such as these. For other athletes, this is through living out and proud within their communities. Each one recognized the lack of representation for the transgender community and wanted to fill that void.

Surveys

The survey distributed to coaches throughout the state of Tennessee contained 12 main questions in addition to the initial question that asked each participant to confirm their eligibility for this research. These questions asked coaches about their understanding of the proposed House Bill 1572, how they understand transgender athletes, and what opinions they hold towards this group of sexual minorities within their schools. This analysis is broken into three categories: demographics of the participants, opinions and experiences of the coaches surveyed, and their responses concerning HB 1572.

Sixty-seven coaches completed the survey. These are individuals currently working in high schools throughout Tennessee. Although the response rate was only 7.45%, the results still provided a glance at the entire state of Tennessee. Of the three regions surveyed, 24 people from the East responded, 23 from the Middle, and 20 from the West resulting in 35.82%, 34.33%, and 29.85% respectively. The balanced sampling of participants means the results are not skewed by a strong showing from a single region of Tennessee. Figure 1 illustrates the balance of regions represented in this study.

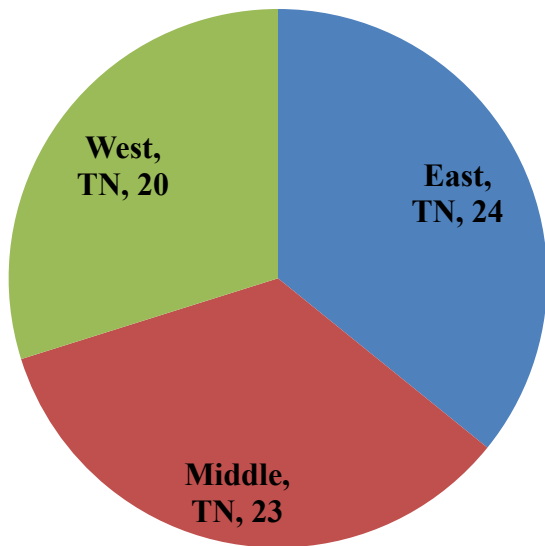


Figure 4.1: Regions represented in survey
Source: Qualtrics Survey.

Because these numbers are so close, the survey responses can provide an accurate overview of the state of Tennessee. Of these responses, only 11 participants reported having worked with transgender athletes in their career. Furthermore, just over 81% of participants who took the survey were between the ages of 26 and 55. The survey results offer a glimpse into the perspectives held by a select group of individuals, while also gaining an understanding of their personal experiences with transgender athletes.

Demographics

The survey asked each person to provide his or her age within a ten year window. This method was chosen in order to maintain an additional level of anonymity for the coaches, but also to gain insight into which generations of people were currently coaching at each of these high schools. It was also used to see if the coaches' age might influence their opinions concerning transgender athletes within their schools. Figure 2 shows the ages of the survey participants. It is clear that the majority of high school coaches who completed the survey fall into the age range of 26 to 55.

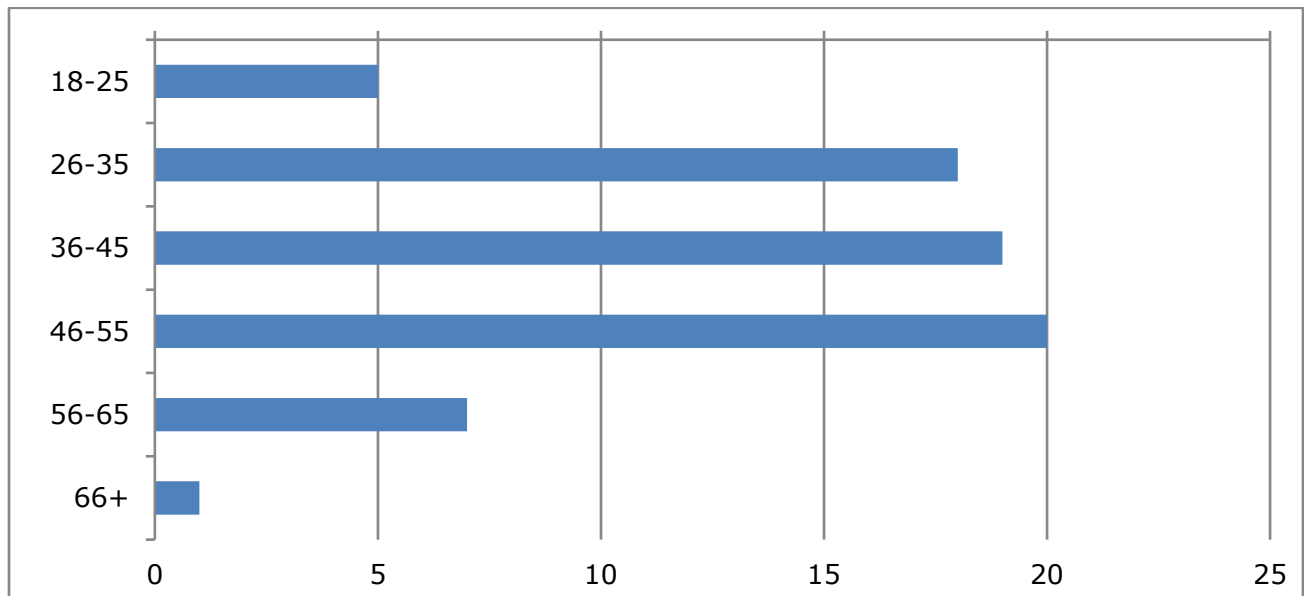


Figure 4.2: Age of survey participants

Source: Qualtrics Survey.

Of the 20 coaches from West Tennessee, only 4 fell into the age range of 26-35. Another 5 were between the ages 36 and 45. The remaining 11 coaches from West Tennessee were between 46 and 65. The East and Middle Tennessee coaches who completed the survey were more evenly dispersed among the other age ranges. Compared to the West, both East and Middle had 7 participants between the ages of 46 and 65. These numbers show a large gap between the generations currently coaching within Tennessee who participated in this survey. I speculate that the vast age gaps between the regions greatly influenced their opinions and perspectives of transgender athletes and HB 1572.

Coaches and Transgender Athletes

Of the 67 coaches surveyed, none reported that they had an extremely bad understanding of transgender athletes, although 4 people did answer with “somewhat bad.” The majority of the coaches, 45.59%, claimed to have a “somewhat good” understanding of transgender athletes and only 17 people responded that their understanding was “extremely good.” Of the 17 who claimed

an extremely good understanding, 11 were from Middle, Tennessee (64.72%). Each participant was also asked if they had any personal experience working with or coaching transgender athletes. While 3 individuals were unsure if they had worked with trans athletes, 54 others claimed they have no experience with transgender athletes. Of the 11 participants who have coached or worked with trans athletes, 8 were from Middle, Tennessee (72.72%). Figure 3 illustrates the consistency shown by the coaches from Middle, Tennessee compared to those from East and West, Tennessee.

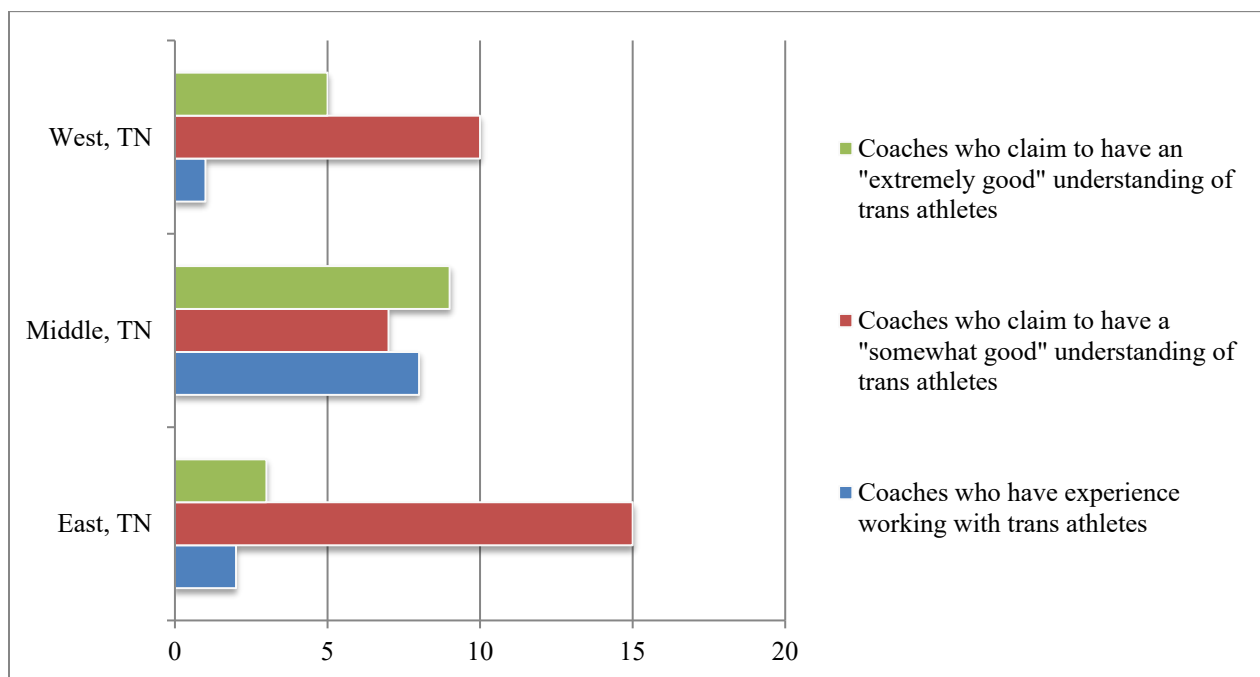


Figure 4.3: Comparative look at coaches who claim to have a good understanding of transgender athletes and coaches who have experience working with transgender athletes.

Source: Qualtrics Survey

In addition to asking coaches how well they understood trans athletes and how much experience they had working with this population, my research aimed to get a glimpse of what the coaches own high school's environment was towards sexual minorities in their athletic department. This information helped place their other answers into a broader perspective of the

high schools in each region of Tennessee. Interestingly, 59.70% of the survey participants claimed “neither negative or positive” when asked about the climate towards sexual minorities in sports at their school. Perhaps this suggests that no incidents have occurred and therefore there is no reason these coaches should be concerned for this population of athletes. It could also show a lack of concern or care for the sexual minorities at these schools. Another influencing factor could be the lack of “out” students in the high schools throughout Tennessee. Although there is no way to know for sure which of these, if any, may have influenced such a high response rate for the “neither” option, they are all important concepts to consider. Outside of this neutral answer, 13 responses claimed a negative climate while 14 claimed a positive climate within their high school. The regions with the highest responses of “somewhat positive” and “very positive” were Middle and West Tennessee. Six participants from West Tennessee claimed their school had a somewhat positive climate. All 4 survey responses for a “very positive” school climate were from coaches in Middle Tennessee. Again, it seems Middle Tennessee is more advanced concerning transgender and other sexual minority athletes in their schools. This region of Tennessee requires a closer examination.

Middle Tennessee

There is certainly a clear distinction between the regions of Tennessee concerning the survey results. Middle Tennessee not only had the most coaches who had experience with transgender athletes, but it also produced the most positive school climate toward sexual minorities. Because 8 of the 11 coaches who have experiences working with trans athletes are also from Middle Tennessee, this group’s responses are examined first. To be clear, the following examines only those coaches from Middle Tennessee who also responded “yes” to working with or coaching transgender athletes.

When asked whether these coaches believe transgender athletes have an unfair advantage in sports, the group was divided. Three coaches chose the neutral position of “neither agree nor disagree” while 4 other coaches agreed that trans athletes have an unfair advantage. Only one coach from this specific group of Middle Tennessee coaches strongly disagreed with this statement. This same group of 8 participants from Middle Tennessee was also rather torn concerning the question of transgender athletes threatening the fairness of sport. It is interesting that these 8 coaches’ opinions vary so greatly across the board. Table 3 breaks down the opinions of each of these coaches, including the position each would hold if HB 1572 were to pass.

Table 4.3: Opinions of Middle TN Coaches who have experience with transgender athletes

Transgender athletes have an unfair advantage in sports	Transgender athletes threaten the fairness of sport	Trans athletes should be allowed to compete in the gender category with which they identify	If this bill is passed in TN, I would
Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	Strongly resist it
Neither agree nor disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat resist it
Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Neither
Somewhat agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly disagree	Strongly support it
Strongly agree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat support it
Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Strongly support it
Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Strongly resist it
Strongly disagree	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	Somewhat resist it

Source: Qualtrics Survey.

Each of these eight coaches has experience with trans athletes and yet they disagree on the concepts of fairness and eligibility for these athletes. Additionally, 4 coaches of these 8 would resist this bill if it were to pass in the senate compared the 3 others who would support this bill. Neither of these figures demonstrates a strong majority. Many factors could have influenced the opinions held by these specific coaches. Many academics believe as well as the

transgender athletes in this research¹⁴ that perspectives vary towards trans women versus trans men, especially within sports. The concept of fairness often accompanies this discussion as many assume that trans women have an unfair advantage against cisgender female athletes.

Opinions Discovered Through the Survey

As discussed above, each coach was asked if they thought transgender athletes had an unfair advantage in sports. Out of the 67 responses, only 4 disagreed. Alternatively, 50 coaches agreed that trans athletes do have an unfair advantage in sports. Fifty seven coaches also agreed that transgender athletes threaten the fairness within sports. My assumption is that this stance is based on the concept of fairness in competition that permeates sports. However, as Knox et. al. point out, transgender athletes are an intolerable unfairness among many other factors that are deemed acceptable by many administrators and competitors in sports. Knox et. al. note that the sports world accepts socioeconomic advantages as a tolerable fairness, even though it plays a large role in the levels of opportunities certain athletes have and others do not have. The various types of athletic bodies are also accepted - to a limited extent - such as extremely tall bodies or extremely agile bodies. These are all advantages that are allowed and accepted in sports whereas transgender athletes represent an unacceptable or intolerable unfairness.¹⁵ This misconception of fairness likely impacts the coaches' opinions concerning the inclusion of transgender athletes in sports. Just over 82% of the coaches in this survey do not think athletes should be allowed to compete in the gender category with which they identify. Instead, this percentage of survey participants supports athletes competing as their sex assigned at birth. Interestingly, it seems like

¹⁴ Athlete A discussed the concept of physical advantages and disadvantages during their interview. Although Athlete A reported that they were able to compete and win against cisgender men without taking testosterone, they still acknowledged that they struggled in certain areas. Athlete A specifically compared their limited lung capacity to those of cisgender men and how they struggled more than the other male athletes.

¹⁵ Knox, Taryn, Lynley Anderson, and Alison Heather. "Transwomen In Elite Sport: Scientific And Ethical Considerations." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 45, no.6 (June 2019): 399. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2018-105208>.

the participants from West Tennessee show the greatest conviction against trans athletes competing within their gender category.

West Tennessee

George Cunningham is a professor at Texas A&M University specializing in diversity and inclusion in sports. Andrew Pickett is Assistant Professor of Sport Management at University of South Dakota where he focuses on creating inclusive physical activity spaces. Together they analyze discrimination experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community as it applies to the sports arena. They recognize that the sports world has seen a positive shift in the level of disdain directed towards lesbian, gay, and bisexual athletes which has not been duplicated for transgender athletes.¹⁶ They do, however, expect the level of discrimination directed towards transgender individuals to diminish as policies become more inclusive around the world.¹⁷ They base this hypothesis on the progress made concerning healthcare options for transgender individuals and the policy updates instituted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA).¹⁸

Cunningham and Pickett compare two identical studies administered in 2007 and again in 2014 to compare how opinions and feelings towards the LGBTQ+ community have progressed in the seven years difference. Their study found that while prejudice towards trans individuals had decreased over time, this decrease was much smaller than the prejudice directed towards lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals.¹⁹ The resistance towards trans individuals, and trans athletes, remains stronger than the resistance towards other sexual minorities. The coaches in West Tennessee echo this mindset. West Tennessee survey participants were much older on

¹⁶ George Cunningham and Andrew Pickett, "Trans Prejudice in Sport: Differences from LGB Prejudice, the Influence of Gender, and Changes Over Time," *Sex Roles* no. 78 (2018): 220. (PROQuest Central)

¹⁷ Cunningham and Pickett, 221.

¹⁸ Cunningham and Pickett, 221-222.

¹⁹ Cunningham and Pickett, 224.

average than those from Middle and East, Tennessee. Since age has already been determined to impact the coaches' opinions towards transgender athletes, it is clear why the opinions held by the West Tennessee survey participants were less inclusive than the other two regions. Only one coach from West Tennessee between the ages of 46 and 55 voted that they would resist HB 1572 if it were passed. Alternatively, only two other participants from West Tennessee would resist this bill and they fell between the ages 26 and 45. Although it appears that coaches in West Tennessee holds the strongest opinions concerning transgender athletes and their inclusion, the other two regions echoed similar opinions, just in smaller numbers. Therefore, it seems the true source of strong disagreement with trans inclusion stems from age.

The questions focused on the strongest opinions were analyzed. These questions include: "Trans athletes have an unfair advantage," "Trans athletes threaten the fairness of sport," and "Trans athletes should be allowed to play in the gender category with which they identify." Next, the answers from these questions were compared with the age group each participant fell within. The most accepting and inclusive opinions were held by individuals aging between 18 and 45. Therefore, the strong opinions from West Tennessee coaches can be traced to the fact this region had the oldest group of participants compared to East and Middle Tennessee.

Coaches and House Bill 1572

Another important purpose of this survey was to discover how the high school coaches of Tennessee view the bill proposed towards trans athletes (HB 1572) and what those opinions might mean moving forward if this bill is passed. Overall, 81.43% of survey participants claimed to have a good understanding of the proposed bill in Tennessee. Although the majority of coaches who participated in this survey were well informed on this bill, the coaches expressed differences of opinion on the impact it might have on their role as coaches. Figure 4 shows a

breakdown of the coaches' answers when asked if this bill would affect their job.

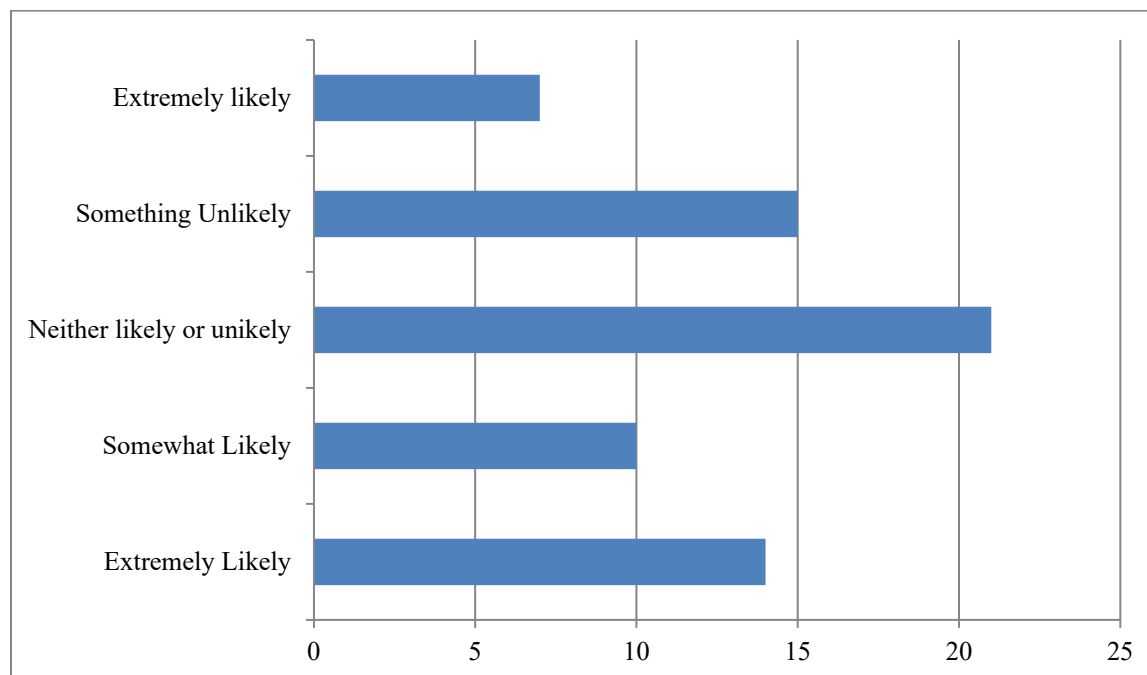


Figure 4.4: Likelihood of HB 1572 impacting the coaches' job

Source: Qualtrics Survey

Although the responses to this question were widely dispersed, 31.43% of coaches chose the neutral position of “neither likely nor unlikely.” This opinion may stem from the assumption coaches hold that their school does not have any transgender athletes at their school and therefore they will not encounter this conflict as a coach.

The coaches participating in this survey were also asked how they would react if HB 1572 were passed in Tennessee. Collectively of all 67 coaches, 16.67% said they would resist this bill if the House and Senate approved the bill and the governor signed it. Whereas, 62.12% would support HB 1572, of this group 50.00% strongly support it. Each region was represented in this 50.00% rather equally; 10 from East, 12 from Middle, 11 from West. The consistency of these numbers throughout the three regions leads us to assume that this sentiment would be echoed through the entire state of Tennessee. There was also a strong percentage (21.21%) of

coaches who chose “neither” when responding to this question. This response is somewhat disheartening because it chooses the side of indifference when dealing with sensitive concerns such as transgender athletes who are in search of allies in their leaders.

Interview Findings

This study analyzed results from five interviews with transgender athletes and survey responses gathered from high school coaches at thirty schools across the state of Tennessee. All interview participants met the minimum age requirement of eighteen and identified as transgender and as an athlete. Each survey participant was a high school coach within the state of Tennessee. To understand the experiences of the athletes and if these experiences can inform the greater society, the coaches of Tennessee included, I identified and analyzed important areas of focus, among them, leadership, community, visibility, and specific areas of conflict for transgender athletes. I identified these themes through coding the interviews with each athlete. This research found that these components have greatly impacted the lives of the transgender athletes included in this study. Although high school coaches cannot influence or change the decision of HB 1572, they still have the opportunity to act as allies and affirm their athletes’ identities. Being an ally to the transgender community is of utmost importance as leadership was one of the most influential components in the lives of these five transgender athletes.

Each of the five interview participants competed in sports in one way or another. Two competed at the collegiate level; another participated in Crossfit, another athlete competed in adult travel leagues, and another competed in high school with aspirations of competing in college. The athletes’ experiences, although different, are more similar than I expected them to be. The similarities highlight areas of importance, whereas the differences focus on different concerns. Opportunity varied greatly among the five athletes. Some were able to compete in their

identified gender category in sports, transition at a relatively young age, and outwardly express their identity, others were not so fortunate. Another main difference was the regional influences on the athletes' perspectives and personal experiences. Together, the athletes' responses provided valuable insights into the unique lives of transgender athletes and should be considered by all individuals who work with or coach them.

Coding

Karen O'Reilly describes an inductive ethnographer as someone who is, "open to surprises, to discovering new ideas or fresh insights, which may even challenge the initial research focus, or take the ethnographer in new directions."²⁰ This approach was used both during the interviews and during analysis. Throughout each interview I also took in-depth notes in order to log personal thoughts while also noting interesting diversions that occurred during the conversations. Much as O'Reilly mentioned, each interview was unique and yet certain topics surfaced throughout all five conversations that were unexpected or not necessarily a topic of direct research in this study. Some of the themes that arose were accessibility to locker rooms or bathrooms of the gender of identification, the influence of individuals in sports leadership positions, visibility for the transgender population, and the importance of community. Each of these topics provided valuable insight into the main concerns of the transgender athletic population as well as their needs and wants as individuals. Interestingly, although all participants referred to the importance of community, community was different for each of them. For instance, one athlete's community was the all-male team they were able to compete with while another athlete's community was a group of similar individuals who may or may not compete in sports at all. These differences highlight the importance of community but also the ability to

²⁰ "Coding," in *Key Concepts in Ethnography*, SAGE Key Concepts (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009): 4. DOI: [10.4135/9781446268308](https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446268308).

define community how each person sees fit for them. Thus, while coding each interview the recurring themes were noted along with the differences within those categories.

Pronoun Usage

Throughout this discussion I use the pronoun they/them when referring to the five interviewees. Some of the athletes designated these as their pronouns while others did not say what were their preferred pronouns were. In an effort to be respectful of the athletes' identities I use they/them pronouns.

Subaltern Counterpublics

Nancy Fraser is a feminist, critical theorist, social scientist, and philosophy professor who dissects the concept of identity politics and focuses on social justice avenues for marginalized groups of people. In her work, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," she discusses the limitations of the public sphere as defined by Jurgen Habermas. She also highlights the many populations that have been excluded from areas of public life, among them women, people of color, queer persons, and more specific to this research, transgender individuals. Fraser recognizes that these marginalized groups attempt to create their own communities as subaltern counterpublics often formed in opposition to those that exercise power in the mainstream public arena.²¹ Fraser elaborates on counterpublics: "On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics."²² Through processes such as collaboration and communication, subaltern counterpublics provide support for one another while also working together against oppressive people.

In her 2009 work *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*,

²¹ "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67. (JSTOR)

²² Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 68.

Fraser revisits the concept of subaltern counterpublics and the public sphere to investigate the impact of the changes social media, internet, and mass communication. Fraser recognizes that globalization has broken down the previous physical and geographical barriers for social justice movements, while also expanding the focus of such movements to address other influential components that were previously unseen.²³ The internet allows communication between subaltern counterpublics to progress by providing access to marginalized individuals seeking friendship, visibility, and representation. Fraser notes that representation, or rather misrepresentations, are very influential in determining who are members of the public sphere, “If representation is the defining issue of the political, then the characteristic political injustice is misrepresentation. Misrepresentation occurs when political boundaries and/or decision rules function wrongly to deny some people the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction – including, but not only, in political arenas.”²⁴ Drawing from Fraser’s insights, it is evident that the exclusion of trans persons from public representation directly impacts their participation in their own social justice movement. By rethinking communities with the use of social media and mass communication, the transgender population is establishing its own public sphere which carries with it a voice, an initiative, and power.

While discussing valuable leadership in their athletic space, Athlete C mentioned “community,” which could also be understood as an example of subaltern counterpublics for the transgender population. Athlete C describes the coach and owner of their gym:

He's also a person from community, and like, so we go way, we go back with that kind of experience together. He's a person from community who has a similar experience, and like, was open about it, you know, and that was like really interesting, and that was part of it. And knowing that I could go to this place where like, this guy knew who I was and it wasn't big deal, and like I had surgery so if I took my shirt off it wasn't that big of a

²³ (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 13-15.

²⁴ Fraser, *Scales of Justice*, 18.

deal.²⁵

Here Athlete C not only highlights the role visibility can play for an individual, but they also reference a different type of community than the commonly-understood one. Athlete C's "community" suggests the transgender community, to which other interview participants also refer. This bears the questions: "What is a community?" "How are these communities defined?" and "Are these concepts malleable or inflexible?"

To some, communities are the geographical areas in which they live. To others, communities are groups of people who support one another. Communities thus can be physical communities of people or digital communities where individuals have unlimited access to one another. The queer community is often used as an umbrella term by gay and lesbian individuals to include every member of the LGBTQ+ community; however, each letter refers to a distinct community or group of persons. As Samantha Allen explains, there is a slight disconnect among these subgroups. Discrimination directed towards lesbian or gay persons is often met with strong disdain whereas hate towards trans persons receives much less push back from the greater public.²⁶ Lesbian, gay, and bisexual all refer to a person's sexual attraction to another person. Alternatively, the term transgender focuses on a person's gender identity. Often the distinctions among these groups can blur, such as a trans person who identifies as a woman-loving woman which denotes their gender identity but also their sexual attraction towards another person. However, the disconnect among groups represented by the acronym LGBTQ+ tends to leave the trans community fending for itself. Perhaps this disconnect among these members resulted in the creation of the "community" to which Athlete C referred. Through this research I discovered how the trans population has had to create their own safe spaces by identifying allies, providing

²⁵ Athlete C, telephone interview with author, May 10, 2020.

²⁶ Allen, "Counterpunch."

support to others, and advocating for their community. They have been forced to do this because trans people are so often excluded from the fight for equality for the LGBTQ+ community.

The lines between subaltern counterpublics and community can begin to blur for marginalized groups in need of voice, visibility, and connection. The trans athletic community has created their own counterpublics with the use of internet and technology which have offered a platform for the trans community. Communities tend to include broader groups of individuals and therefore may include allies and friends who may not directly identify as transgender but still advocate for this population. Concerning transgender athletes, this community and counterpublics can include individuals who stand up for trans athletes in the face of discrimination and hatred. These individuals have the power to elevate the voices of trans persons in order to challenge the oppression they face. In the sports world, this can look like teammates using the correct pronouns and chosen names while also supporting policies that protect their marginalized teammates. Communities and subaltern counterpublics that include more than just transgender persons, but also their allies and friends, can turn into a much larger web of people who can offer support, guidance, and voice. Other individuals of the queer community offer the most immediate opportunity for connection between subaltern communities. As Allen suggests, the perspective towards lesbian and gay individuals are more accepting than those towards the trans community.²⁷ Therefore, the gay and lesbian community, known otherwise as the subaltern counterpublics, has the opportunity to extend allyship and support to the trans counterpublics. This has the power to uplift the marginalized queer population in unique ways.

Ambassadors to the Community

This study included interviews with four trans male athletes and one trans female athlete,

²⁷ Allen, "Counterpunch."

all with very different and yet very similar experiences. Their ages varied as did their geographical locations which both impacted the stories they shared and the experiences they had. Every athlete expressed the need for an accepting community. This community can exist as a team or an athletic complex of people such as a gym or specific arena like a racquetball complex or tennis complex. This community also includes fellow transgender individuals who support one another, answer questions, and provide visibility for folks who are yearning for a role model. Community also acts as a group that does not question the identity of these individuals, no matter where they are in their transition or if they do not want to transition at all. The athletes spoke of their communities with compassion and gratitude. It was evident that the individuals who make up such communities play an integral role in the mental health of transgender individuals. Athletes who lived in less inclusive areas of the country expressed an additional amount of appreciation for their community because they recognized how rare it was to have those people in their lives. For instance, there may only be one gym in an entire town that openly supports the LGBTQ+ community by flying flags and providing gender neutral spaces. Athlete C discussed the power this representation held for the queer community. They also noted how public show of support communicates to others that this space is inclusive and therefore, those who do not support the queer community understand that this may not be the gym for them.²⁸ This communication can be just as important as the inclusivity offered by the gym.

Many of the athletes also expressed an urgency to act as ambassadors to the transgender community as well as the heterosexual community who are interested in taking steps towards being more understanding of sexual minorities. The athletes viewed being ambassadors as an integral step towards lasting change for the trans community. Athlete A proudly shared that their high school was evaluating their policies and school environment as a result of their experience

²⁸ Athlete C.

while attending this school. Without being publicly vocal and sharing those unfortunate experiences, this change may not have occurred. Athlete A was also the most diligent about remaining public throughout this study. They wanted their story to be heard, including the horrible experiences of discrimination and outright mistreatment.²⁹ Athlete E was also adamant about their role in educating cisgender individuals and having those difficult conversations in order to spark change for the trans population. This particular individual was much older than the other four athletes and this age seemed to bring a different level of understanding and compassion to the cisgender population. Athlete E lived through a different generation of discrimination and hate which certainly influenced their position on certain matters such as inclusion and transitioning. They had a more relaxed level of urgency in their voice throughout the interview compared to the other four athletes. Perhaps this stemmed from living in the shadows for many years until finally reaching an age they felt comfortable enough to come out and live as their true self. Certainly the many years of a silenced identity would impact a person's outlook on such matters. It also seemed as though Athlete E had yearned for this level of visibility throughout their younger years and therefore saw it necessary to be an ambassador for other trans people.³⁰

Leadership

Leaders exist in many different forms for many different people. In the athletic realm leaders are coaches, team captains, and athletic directors. This research found that these individuals tend to hold more power than other people in the athletes' lives. Although the individuals who held these leadership roles varied from interviewee to interviewee, each athlete expressed gratitude towards these people in their lives. For instance, Athlete A competed at the

²⁹ Athlete A, telephone interview with author, April 21, 2020.

³⁰ Athlete E, telephone interview with author, April 21, 2020.

collegiate level and expressed interest in joining the team of the opposite sex from the individual's sex identified at birth, which would accurately align with that person's gender identity.³¹ Athlete A reported that the day after they expressed this interest, their athletic director approached them with an entire game plan on how to apply these changes and make a smooth transition for all:

He had already looked through everything that I sent him, he did his own research and he even went to the men's locker room and took a video of the physical space. And he said, in order for there to be more privacy for all players, not just you, we can put up a changing station here, we can put up double shower curtains in the showers. He like, he was already planning on the physical modifications of the space to make it a physically safe, welcoming, and supportive environment in the men's locker room for me.³²

There is no question that this individual was indeed a “guardian angel,” as Athlete A described him. Not only did the athletic director provide advocacy for the athlete, he also altered the physical space for the betterment of all the athletes at this school. It is important to note, though, that this only occurred after Athlete A advocated for themselves after many months of torment and poor treatment from other individuals. Athlete A had expressed their needs such as correct pronoun and name usage and the ability to wear the men's jersey rather than the women's jersey. Unfortunately, these requests were met with resistance and ridicule from teammates and coaches.³³ A single leader can make a vast difference in the life of an athlete reaching out for help and trying to advocate for themselves.

Athlete E also expressed a level of concern when joining a new sports league for fear of how the other teammates might react to their presence on the team. When they expressed this concern to a fellow teammate, Athlete E received this response, “You will never have to defend

³¹ Athlete A.

³² Athlete A.

³³ Athlete A.

your position on my team. You will always be welcome here.”³⁴ This sports league had only ever known Athlete E as her female identity, which added an additional layer of comfort for this athlete. The inclusion they felt started at the top tier of their sports organization that had established firm policies concerning transgender athletes. This athletic organization communicated these standards to the other athletes participating in this league that were also accepting and welcoming towards this interviewee. Athlete E described this experience further, “To be fully embraced by them as a team member was fantastic. I mean we’ve done the whole laughing and crying together. We travel together. We win together. I’ve never met anything from my teammates other than full and total acceptance.”³⁵ It was evident that this was an emotional experience for Athlete E to describe as their voice began to get shaky during this part of the interview.

Within their gym, Athlete D also had a leader who provided advocacy towards sexual minorities. However, this athlete noted the difference between the owners and the coach within their gym. They reported that their coach acts as a strong ally, referring to her as a “mother-figure” in their life.³⁶ The owner of the gym, however, was rather resistant to attending trainings or educating himself on the transgender population and the needs of transgender athletes who attend this gym. Without the coach, Athlete D’s experience at this gym would be much more negative and perhaps not continue at all. Without inclusive leadership and policies, Athlete A and E probably would have had drastically different experiences in their athletic environments.

My interview with Athlete D also highlighted education as an important step towards inclusive policies. The athletes identified education as an important component of being an ally in a leadership position. There are many different avenues for educating leaders on transgender

³⁴ Athlete E.

³⁵ Athlete E.

³⁶ Athlete D, telephone interview with author, May 11, 2020.

issues and the needs to sexual minorities. Schools can offer training to their coaches to discuss ways to make their athletic space inclusive for all athletes. The training should also include other athletic staff such as trainers, recruiters, athletic directors. Athlete A emphasized that this training should be mandatory not only for each person in leadership but also for each athlete.³⁷

Due to the roles teammates and other athletes played in the lives of the interviewees, it seems this education and training should also be a requirement for all athletes. While each interviewee shared positive experiences with their teammates, they also discussed the negative experiences they had had with fellow athletes. Athlete A recalled discrimination they experienced throughout middle and high school that persisted during college as well.³⁸ Other athletes noted that they felt lucky not to have encountered such discrimination, revealing that perhaps they expected discriminatory treatment from their fellow teammates. Sensitivity training and education should be as equally important as sexual harassment training for coaches, staff, and athletes.

The coaches and administrators in leadership positions must also acknowledge the conflicting areas for the trans community (bathrooms and locker rooms, pronouns, and misgendering) and ensure each athlete is cared for and feels safe. As this research has shown, sometimes this means leaning on the policies already in place, or educating themselves through seminars and training, and other times it means being a physical ally between the athlete and other individuals within a personal space. For example, Athlete C described multiple experiences in which they were forced to rely on their teammates or friends while using a restroom. The teammates or friends were asked to watch the door or check the restroom for other individuals. This was in effort to provide safety to Athlete C and to create a more comfortable situation for

³⁷ Athlete A and Athlete D.

³⁸ Athlete A.

everyone involved.³⁹ In order for individuals to benefit from inclusive policies, these policies must exist. This can include gender neutral bathrooms, non-discrimination rules, and open door policies. Conversely, the policy proposed in HB 1572 in Tennessee would allow coaches to be less inclusive of their transgender athletes, which could cause additional damage to the mental health and safety of transgender and gender nonconforming athletes. Inclusive policies can provide opportunity to a person who wants to be an ally but is not quite sure what s/he can do to help trans persons. Instituting inclusive policies also gives this person the opportunity to support the queer community and create a wave of change.

Visibility

Representation is something many people take for granted. Couples on television programs tend to be a man and a wife, until recent years both were white, both relatively middle class. This is repeated on television sets, within movie theaters, and across social media outlets. This is an example of heterocentrism in the current age. Although the queer community has seen an increase in representation⁴⁰, the transgender community still lacks strong and consistent representation within television shows, movies, and in the media. Visibility can have positive results for this community and can exist in many different forms.

Athlete C mentioned that the owner of their gym displayed a trans flag and a rainbow flag, among others, which provided an additional level of inclusion and visibility to the queer community of this gym. Athlete C described how this gesture made them feel: “it is really powerful to be in a place where there’s like a trans flag up, and a rainbow flag, it’s pretty cool.”⁴¹

³⁹ Athlete C.

⁴⁰ Transgender representation has increased on television shows and in movies. Examples include “The Fosters,” “Chilling Adventures of Sabrina,” “Orange is the New Black,” and many more, which feature trans characters. More importantly, shows such as “Pose,” “Transparent,” “Tales of the City,” and “Nanette” have lead transgender characters, thus providing even more representation to this community.

⁴¹ Athlete C.

The visibility provided by those in leadership positions can help support and provide “power” to the transgender community. Displaying such flags can not only represent a safe space for these sexual minorities, it can also spark an important and educational conversation. There are many flags representative of the queer community: light blue with pink and white is a trans flag; the bisexual flag is pink, purple and blue, while the rainbow flag is intended to represent the entire LGBTQ+ community. Flying such flags within a business or professional space speaks to the queer community as a space that is safe and welcoming to each individual. Moreover, displaying these flags may cause those who see the flags to question their meaning leading to education and understanding.

Many of the athletes mentioned that people they encountered were curious about their lives, their experiences, and more. Although it is not always appropriate to depend on the oppressed individual to educate others, the athletes in this study felt that being educators was an important part of their identity. In this sense, they were leaders of educating others. Athlete E and I discussed that opinions and assumptions tend to change once a personal relationship is built between a queer person and a heterosexual person. This athlete, along with Athlete A, expressed that building this relationship, answering the difficult questions, and being a public face was an important part of being an out, trans person. Athlete E also acknowledged the effect poor representation can have on the transgender community. Rather than being a positive role model, stereotypical depictions of transgender individuals actually mislead members of the mainstream society and created extra barriers between trans folks and cisgender individuals. Athlete E noted that these barriers began to break down as the previously mentioned relationship starts to build.⁴² In most cases, it seems that the work of breaking down walls and creating relationships begins at

⁴² Athlete A and E. Athlete E discussed the misrepresentations of transgender individuals that tend to stir confusion amongst cisgender individuals.

small, local levels. Specific to this research, these relationships start in the gym, on the court or the sidelines, and in the classrooms.

Areas of Discomfort

Many of the interview participants discussed their personal experiences with locker room and restroom situations that left them feeling uncomfortable, unsafe, and invisible. The importance of visibility has already been noted: however, another part of visibility involves those in the mainstream acknowledging the needs of the person who dwells outside the mainstream. In this case, it is coaches, teammates, and administrators seeing the transgender person and acknowledging their needs. Athlete A noted that their athletic director took the necessary steps to ensure they had accessible spaces on campus.⁴³ Other athletes shared that their friends or teammates offered support in order for them to use public restrooms.

Athlete C recalled multiple experiences with public restrooms that caused them to rely on their friends for safety and accessibility. Each of these instances occurred within southeastern states. Although Athlete C admitted their feeling unsafe stemmed from their assumptions about the regions they resided in, they also noted that the lack of accessibility was a common occurrence in these areas. For instance, Athlete C recalled entering a men's restroom in a bar that only had urinals, so that they were forced to depend on their friends to check the other restroom and stand at the door for protection. Athlete C suggested that without these people, the scenario could have ended much differently.⁴⁴ Trans individuals face dangerous exposure which make restrooms unsafe areas. When discussing the inner turmoil experienced concerning restrooms, Athlete C said, "I know for me, particularly, bathrooms are anxiety ridden."⁴⁵ Interestingly enough, there seemed to be slightly less fear as Athlete C discussed the restroom at their gym

⁴³ Athlete A.

⁴⁴ Athlete C.

⁴⁵ Athlete C.

compared to the ones in bars and at fast food stations alongside the highway. The restrooms at the gym are single stalls which provide additional privacy. This is the same gym that has a transgender flag on display. They also recalled their experience at another gym stating, “I definitely would not use the bathroom, I would not use the locker room.”⁴⁶ It is obvious that an inclusive and openly supportive gym made all the difference for Athlete C, especially concerning the restrooms. They attributed this feeling of comfort to multiple things such as fellow gym members being part of the transgender community or knowing someone that is part of the community.⁴⁷ As discussed, these individuals share a relationship with someone in the community, which creates a different level of comfort for the transgender individual.

Another interview participant, Athlete D, described their experience with bathrooms at their local gym, “In terms of bathrooms, there’s really no issues. Since going in there I really have the freedom to use whatever bathroom I wanted.”⁴⁸ However, they expressed concern when it came to the shower situation in their gym because these areas were highly polarized spaces in terms of gender. During these instances, the coach attempted to help Athlete D navigate this scenario through communication but the athlete still described this situation as “weird” for themselves and the other gym members. This athlete also expressed fear of locker room spaces reporting that they have been an uncomfortable space throughout their entire life.⁴⁹

As mentioned above, Athlete A’s coach took extensive measures to create an inclusive locker room environment for them and other athletes on campus. Although the locker room could be a space of anxiety and fear, Athlete A also recalled the way it felt to walk into a locker room that aligned with their gender identity:

⁴⁶ This was not Athlete C’s consistent gym location. They described a 24 hour gym franchise.

⁴⁷ Athlete C.

⁴⁸ Athlete D.

⁴⁹ Athlete D.

Walking into the men's locker room, like walking into a locker room with a figure that looks like me, [referring to the signs signifying men's and women's restrooms] like walking into a space where other masculine people would get dressed or showered or listen to music in the locker room before going to practice . . . that was the most affirming experience. Being able to walk into the men's locker room with my masculine team, listen to our music, shower together, change together, train together. Like being associated with the men's team was 100% more affirming than being associated with the women's.⁵⁰

The men's locker room offered welcoming and affirming space in which they could be their true self because it aligned with their identity. This came after they transitioned from playing on the women's team to the men's team. This move occurred because Athlete A recognized their mental health was suffering and staying on the women's team was causing harm to their own health. However, Athlete A continued the previously mentioned discussion, "even when I was on the women's team it could have been an affirming space for me, it could have been a team that I stayed on had they used gender neutral language, had they changed the signs to the locker room to be more affirming, had they chosen to like respect who I am."⁵¹ They also noted that the leaders in the athletic department could have taken necessary steps to create a more inclusive space, especially in the locker rooms. This could have influenced Athlete A to remain on the women's team.⁵²

The discussion with Athlete B concerning bathrooms and locker rooms was much different than that with the other participants. Rather than expressing concern for themselves, Athlete B noted the level of confusion that can result from strict gender policies, "The whole use the bathroom with your assigned sex at birth. Well, if you really want transgender individuals to do that they're going to wonder why there's a girl in the guy's bathroom and a guy in the girl's

⁵⁰ Athlete A.

⁵¹ Athlete A.

⁵² Athlete A.

bathroom. It's just going to confuse the whole public.”⁵³ What was not discussed, but still very important to this conversation, is that this confusion can lead to dangerous environment for transgender individuals. Furthermore, this confusion is rooted in the binary gender norms ingrained in today's society in addition to stereotypes which cause others to threaten the safety of the trans population.

As demonstrated, restrooms and locker rooms are areas of great discomfort for transgender individuals. So much so that many of the interview participants advocated gender neutral spaces in order to alleviate this discomfort. It seems, then, a contradiction exists between trans individuals wanting to be accepted as their true identity, while also relying on neutral spaces for both safety and ease. On one hand, trans individuals cling to the binary of male and female in an effort to have their identity affirmed by the public. On the other hand, they have requested gender neutral areas, which seemingly refute the concept of the gender binary altogether. Certainly restrooms and locker rooms are spaces of vulnerability, especially for athletes who undress around one another on a weekly and daily basis. Therefore, trans people have different needs concerning these areas compared to other spaces they may feel safe and accepted.

The segregation of restrooms was very similar to segregation within sports. Women were assumed to need protection from men, especially in such vulnerable situations as restrooms. Lisa Platt and Sarah Milam summarize the work of Westbrook and Schilt stating, “Theoretically, when a so-called ‘improper body’ enters this female-only space, fear dominates reactions to this norm violation.” Platt and Milam refer to a panic that ensues once a man enters a female

⁵³ Athlete B, telephone interview with author, April 21, 2020.

restroom.⁵⁴ Therefore, the gender display of a transgender person is very important when considering the use of public restrooms. If a person challenges the sex of the users of a particular restroom, panic will then ensue.

Similarly, locker rooms are areas of uncertainty for many individuals, especially members of the LGBTQ+ community. Timothy Curry observed interactions between men within locker rooms to better understand this environment. Male athletes, who must meet traditional standards of masculinity to be accepted in the sports world, participated in discussions and activities that reinforced their masculinity and therefore maintained their status as a dominating male athlete. As Curry notes, these discussions included “talk about women as objects, homophobic talk, and talk that is very aggressive and hostile towards women.”⁵⁵ Gender norms associated with sports can lead to an uncomfortable and perhaps unsafe environment for queer male athletes in locker room areas.

Vasu Reddy and Sonia Magni also discuss the history of restroom and locker room politics and why these spaces often are areas of conflict concerning the LGBTQ+ community. They note that restrooms once provided areas for individuals to participate in sexual intercourse, especially gay men who capitalized on the privacy of these spaces.⁵⁶ The ease of access for sexual explorations, combined with the strong presence of homophobia in men’s locker rooms and restrooms, paints a rather uneasy picture for men wishing to avoid both of these scenarios.

Alex Faktor also analyzed restroom dynamics, specifically for transgender individuals. Faktor discusses the concept of transgender restrooms as a means of inclusion for this

⁵⁴ "Public Discomfort with Gender Appearance-Inconsistent Bathroom use: The Oppressive Bind of Bathroom Laws for Transgender Individuals," *Gender Issues* 35, no. 3 (2018): 185. (PROQuest Central)

⁵⁵ "Fraternal Bonding in the Locker Room: A Profeminist Analysis of Talk About Competition and Women," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8 (1991): 128. (EBSCO)

⁵⁶ "Performative Queer Identities: Masculinities and Public Bathroom Usage," *Sexualities* 10, no. 2 (April 2007): 233-234. (SAGE)

marginalized population.⁵⁷ This concept seems radical amidst the recent movements throughout the United States to prohibit the access of transgender individuals in restrooms that align with their identity rather than their assigned sex at birth. Faktor recognizes that a transgender or otherwise gender-inclusive restroom area may still place targets upon the backs of sexual minorities.⁵⁸ Perhaps the gender neutral restrooms offer refuge for all individuals, trans people included, without declaring one's identity to the rest of the world.

More importantly, gender neutral spaces are just the Band-Aid to a much larger, systemic issue within athletics. The strong focus on masculinity and male gender roles has fostered an environment of homophobia and hate towards feminine men and masculine women. This culture endangers those who do not fall within the cisgender and heterosexual populations. Thus, it is clear why the transgender athletes interviewed during this research called for gender neutral spaces, because this is the easiest solution to a much larger problem. Taking this progression a step further, Paul Iida and Cuhullan McGivern offer their suggestions to further the inclusion of LGBTQ+ athletes. They urge athletic programs to evaluate their administration and current culture towards these marginalized populations in order to establish programs that will educate coaches and other athletic administrators.⁵⁹ Their findings were similar to those of this study. To establish lasting change that will benefit the LGBTQ+ athletic community, the focus must remain on the administration and the systems in place at this level. A gender neutral space can provide a safe haven in the interim until these changes has occurred.

Trans Athletes' Level of Success

Another important finding of this research was the high level of athletic ability and

⁵⁷ "Access and Exclusion," *Journal of Human Security* 7, no. 3 (2011): 17. (PROQuest Central)

⁵⁸ Faktor, 17.

⁵⁹ "Creating an LGBTQ+-Affirming Locker Room: Education for Prevention," *Multicultural Education* 26, no. 2 (Winter, 2019): 19. (PROQuest Central)

success each athlete had experienced throughout their lives. For example, Athlete D was Female Athlete of the Year and Female Scholar Athlete of the Year and was nominated for NCAA Player of the Year while competing on the women's team at their university. Athlete A was a three-sport athlete in high school, captain of each of those teams, and went to nationals during that time. Athlete E played in competitive tennis leagues that travel all around the country for tournaments. Athlete C competed in Crossfit competitions although they referred to their athletic ability as "average." Athlete B spent years playing sports and hopes to obtain enough muscle and skill to compete on their college sports team.⁶⁰

It is interesting that each of these five athletes are highly competitive within their own sports and yet some have given up that level of success to live as their true selves. Athlete A specifically discusses moving from playing on the women's team at their university to the men's team:

I would feel like the competition when I was on the women's team was closer, was more competitive than when I was . . . on the men's team because not only did I have a shoulder injury, but I biologically, I wasn't on testosterone. I was competing against cismen who have higher stamina, who have, like, larger muscle mass, who, who, unfortunately, were not out of breath, when I was searching for oxygen. But even though like, I would say like, the competition like match wise wasn't necessarily as fun because of that, I had an overall exponentially better experience on the men's team because of the social aspects of like, being with my boys.⁶¹

Although this athlete was confident that they could compete at a high level on the men's team, they also recognized the vast difference in athletic ability when competing with cis men rather than remaining on the women's team. And yet Athlete A made the decision to give up their spot on the women's team in order to be a member of the men's team because their livelihood and mental health depended on this.

Athlete B also mentions their aspiration of competing on the men's wrestling team at

⁶⁰ Interviews with athletes.

⁶¹ Athlete A.

their current college. When asked if they had contacted anyone in the athletic department to let them know of their interest, they responded: “I haven’t reached out to them but I’ve went to almost all the practices and seen what they’ve been doing so I know how to prepare. I want to ask them this coming year. This past year I’ve been focusing on trying to weight lift, and get as much muscle mass as I can so I can compete.”⁶² It is clear that Athlete B recognizes that they need to increase their muscular build in order to be able to compete with the cismen on the team at their university. More importantly, this athlete forfeited a full ride to college through the ROTC in order to live as their authentic self. So, it is apparent that athletes and other trans individuals give up certain parts of their lives in order to live as their authentic selves. Examples discussed here are success and money (in form of scholarship or tuition in this instance) but other factors could be privilege, family, relationships, and community.

Both Athlete A and B touch on one of the most controversial aspects of transgender athletes competing not with their biological gender, but the gender of identity. Often the concern revolves around their ability as an athlete and how this may impact the sport once this person decides to compete on a team that does not align with their assigned sex at birth. Coaches, athletes, parents of athletes, fans, and more share this concern. This is also where many people’s opinions vary in regard to trans women and trans men, because many believe trans women retain a large portion of their muscle strength even after they transition. As the only trans woman interviewed, Athlete E was much different than the other four athletes and offers important insight into the life of a trans female athlete. Compared to the other athletes, Athlete E did not transition until very late in life. Critics tend to assume that a trans woman who transitions this late in life would also retain the many years of male muscle growth and bone mass. Although researchers have found that trans women do in fact retain a significant amount of their muscle

⁶² Athlete B.

mass, this does not discount other changes that occur throughout their bodies which can remove some of their previous athletic ability prior to transitioning.⁶³

Athlete E described their experience playing on the women's tennis team under the USTA organization. They explained that this organization separated athletes by their ability rather than by age. The tennis groups are tiered and each athlete has the ability to move up a tier once their skill level is proven eligible. When Athlete E first started playing in the league with USTA, their record was 60-4; 60 wins and only 4 losses. As a result of their exceptional record in that field bracket, they bumped up to the next level placing them in a more challenging bracket. This athlete reported that since playing in this bracket they only win about fifty percent of the time as compared to the previous, less challenging bracket.⁶⁴ Contrary to common assumptions that cis women cannot compete against trans women, Athlete E faces adversity as an athlete.

Ideal Future for Transgender Athletes

The final question of each interview asked each athlete to describe their ideal future for trans gender athletes. Athlete A urged athletic leaders to evaluate their language and their physical spaces in order to provide more gender neutral options for their athletes, "I would start by having every single person in athletics, whether that's athletic directors, coaches, parents, guardians, whoever it may be, like taking a pledge to use gender neutral language in sport."⁶⁵ This language begins at the surface level with bathroom signs and extends further into how announcers present athletes before their game and what type of mascots are chosen for the men's and women's team. Athlete A noted that an important step towards inclusive language starts with recognizing that not all masculine individuals identify as male and not all feminine people

⁶³ Gooren and Bunck, 428.

⁶⁴ Athlete E.

⁶⁵ Athlete A.

identify as female. They also urged increased education and awareness for all individuals in the athletic department in order to achieve the previously mentioned goals for an ideal future. Not only did Athlete A suggest this training for coaches and athletic directors but also for the athletes.

Lastly, they would have transgender athletes play on the team that is best for the individual. This sentiment was echoed by the other athletes who urged that athletes should have the choice to do what is best for them. Sometimes this will mean transgender athletes will change from one team to another. This may also mean that transgender athletes will remain on the team they have always played on. This would vary person to person so these decisions should be made on a case by case decision. The steps necessary to achieve the ideal future that Athlete A have been discussed throughout this thesis. Mahoney et. al. discuss this concept that has been developed under the School Success and Opportunity Act, which also transgender athletes to choose the team on which they would like to compete. As of 2015, only a handful of young athletes had taken advantage of this opportunity but this demonstrates an optimistic and real application of the dreams the athletes included in this research dream of.⁶⁶

Athlete B's answer to the final question also focused on language. But rather than pointing to gender neutral language for their ideal future, they wished for the term transgender to eventually disappear altogether. They wanted society to recognize that the transgender population is not a separate population but rather part of the greater society.⁶⁷ Language holds power, especially for marginalized groups such a people of color, women, and sexual minorities. Language is something many take for granted because it is ingrained from birth. Also, with

⁶⁶ Tara Mahoney, Mark Dodds, and Katherine Polasek, "Progress for Transgender Athletes: Analysis of the School Success and Opportunity Act," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 86, no. 6 (Aug. 2015): 45-46. DOI: 10.1080/07303084.2015.1054202.

⁶⁷ Athlete B.

language comes stereotypes and assumptions that tend to benefit the affluent, white, heterosexual population. Therefore, language is an integral stepping stone towards an inclusive and accepting future for the transgender population, especially within sports. Athlete C echoed similar dreams for their ideal future. They looked forward 100, 200 years down the road to envision a world where a person's gender identity is not the concern of the public. Rather than questioning a person's identity, Athlete C urged the athletic world to just let people play. They discussed that there are always winners and losers, which is the nature of sports altogether.⁶⁸ Although they recognized that just letting people play was a simple answer to a complex problem, both Athlete D and Athlete E shared a similar sentiment. As Athlete E noted, the number of transgender athletes does not comprise the majority of athletes in the sports world. The athletes suggested that it is unnecessary to create policies that hinder the eligibility of transgender athletes. Furthermore, the policies can encourage discrimination and hate towards these athletes.⁶⁹

Training for Leaders in Athletic Departments

The most significant finding through this research was the role leaders play in transgender people's lives. This is not a surprising outcome since leaders tend to be privileged individuals who have the power to make decisions and influence other people. The experiences of the interview participants highlight that individuals in these roles can be voices for marginalized populations, in this case, transgender athletes. Although Tennessee coaches did not report many instances of working with or coaching transgender athletes, as culture continues to evolve towards a more inclusive society, more and more young people will be able to express and share their gender identities as transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming. Therefore, high school coaches throughout Tennessee and around the entire country need to

⁶⁸ Athlete C.

⁶⁹ Interviews with athletes.

understand their role in the lives of their athletes who are also sexual minorities. This research shows not only will this awareness impact these athletes' lives, but also that inclusivity for trans athletes can also be inclusivity for all athletes. This research led to recommendations for the coaches within the state of Tennessee in order to provide visibility and safety to transgender athletes while also creating a more informed athletic environment for all.

First, all coaches, other athletic staff, educators, trainers need to attend training that educates them on their marginalized student populations. This training needs to cover the many different pronouns available to individuals and how to properly use these pronouns. Athlete A strongly expressed that a person's pronouns are not a choice, they are a demand. This is not something another individual can simply choose to ignore. The power of language has already been discussed. Using a person's pronouns correctly can be the difference between losing an athlete to the pressures of trying to live as a misunderstood student and extending a hand to a member of a highly discriminated group.

The training should also include education on gender neutral language. This extends to many different areas within the athletic arena. In order to gain buy-in from leaders within the school, they must also understand how much gender is ingrained within language and what power that can hold. Gender neutral language is difficult to learn after many years of very binary thinking and binary environments. Change starts with unlearning the many ways in which gender has infected common language and continues by establishing a new standard with language moving forward. This has the power to support many people in addition to transgender athletes. There are many ways coaches can alter their language to be more gender neutral if not fully gender neutral. This can be as simple as introducing a team by their mascot name or simply the sport they are playing, rather than including the "women's" or "men's" team during the

introduction. By altering the language, the announcers and athletic department are recognizing that not everyone may identify as the same gender as their teammate. Along with using names, it is especially important to recognize and use a transgender athlete's chosen name rather than their dead name. Athlete A described many instances where announcers, coaches, and fellow teammates failed to use their accurate name and instead used their dead name and dead pronouns. Not only does this disrespect the needs of individuals within the transgender population it also invalidates their voice. Through these interviews, it has become very apparent that listening to and believing transgender people is of utmost importance. This includes trusting their gender expression while also respecting their chosen names and chosen pronouns.

As previously mentioned, physical spaces are often gendered without question. In order to create gender neutral spaces, the school and athletic department must evaluate their own spaces and identify areas of conflict and areas of improvement. For this to be most effective, a member of the LGBTQ+ community should likely be involved to provide insight and awareness to those who may otherwise fail to recognize these spaces in their school. The transgender athletes included in this research did not have expectations that all spaces should be gender neutral. Instead, this should simply be an option for those who prefer a gender neutral space. It can offer an additional level of privacy for those who are not comfortable in public restrooms or locker rooms. In the athletic realm, spaces that can be transformed to gender neutral areas include restrooms and private locker rooms.

While all these steps sound good in theory, a crucial part of the training should be mock interactions in order to evaluate each person's understanding of this training and to grow their comfort with things like gender neutral terms and new pronouns such as "they" and "them." These changes are structural changes that will take time and consistency in order to become the

new norm.

Final Thoughts

The findings in this research were very similar to those found by Tamar Semerjian and Jodi Cohen, who also interviewed transgender athletes. The five athletes in this study had to grapple with very similar struggles as those in Semerjian and Cohen's study: the uneasiness in locker rooms and restrooms, seeking acceptance of their identity, and a complicated relationship with the gender binary. At the conclusion of their research, the scholars called for more studies concerning trans athletes who compete at all levels from recreational to elite.⁷⁰ The current study did just that. From a study completed in 2006 to the current one held in 2020, very little had changed for transgender athletes.

The surveys and interviews for this research offered a close look at the experiences of the five transgender athletes and the opinions held by high school coaches through the state of Tennessee. Although many of the findings through this research were expected, there were some unexpected findings as well. Preliminary assumptions anticipated transgender athletes to have much worse experiences with discrimination and hate than they reported. Some athletes shared their negative experiences but they glossed over these very quickly and continued to call themselves lucky despite whatever hate they had faced. It seems as though each athlete did, in fact, experience discrimination but they did not want their identity to be defined by these occurrences.

Another surprising finding from the interviews was how important leaders were for every single athlete included in this research. The importance of visibility and representation for sexual minorities was evident, but this was on a greater scale. Leaders can make a difference on a

⁷⁰ “FTM Means Female to Me’: Transgender Athletes Performing Gender, *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 42. (ProQuest Central)

personal level for transgender individuals. The results from these allies can be immediate as compared to having to wait on structural change that many hope for. Understanding the significance of leaders to each of the athletes emphasized how important it was to understand the opinions of the coaches through Tennessee. Understanding this importance also offered optimism for the future of transgender athletes within sports.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

The surveys of high school coaches demonstrated that many were not as welcoming towards transgender athletes as I originally hoped they would be. Within all three regions of Tennessee there were coaches who stated they would resist discriminating legislation. These coaches offer optimism for the future of transgender athletes and have the opportunity to make a difference for their minority athletes. Furthermore, many coaches who completed the survey were curious about this research and wanted to continue this discussion further. For anonymity sake these discussions did not continue but their interest and willingness to learn more and continue this discussion suggested hope for the future. Perhaps these conversations would not have been positive concerning trans athletes, or perhaps they would have. Either way, those discussions can lead to education and change.

Transgender athletes were interviewed to learn their stories, to honor their experiences, and to discover the best way to advocate for this population of people. Although all five athletes named leaders as the most influential people in their lives, this could be simplified further to those who are in close proximity with trans people who also have privilege and power. In a workplace, these are managers and human resource associates. In athletics, these are the coaches, administrators, and even trainers. In the public, these are white, cis people who do not have to fear for their safety while out in public. The interviews with the five athletes highlighted that everyone can be leaders in the lives of transgender people, even if we don't necessarily see ourselves as such.

Personally, through this research I gained an additional sense of urgency concerning the education of others on trans athletes and my role as a cisgender woman who also identifies as an athlete. Prior to beginning this study, I spoke with former team mates about the possibility of

researching transgender athletes to which I often received very strong opinions. Many were not accepting of transgender athletes for fear that the sport would no longer be considered fair for cisgender female athletes. Moreover, there was a high degree of apathy towards even considering the inclusion of transgender athletes. The level of misunderstanding and discriminating dialogue that I witnessed during these conversations was a catalyst to start this research.

My own considerations for including and accepting transgender athletes stemmed from the understanding that all athletes are afforded different advantages and what makes an athlete is how they navigate these advantages or disadvantages to persevere through competition. This can include adaptation, increased levels of dedication to improving skill and abilities, and playing sports that suit one's natural talents for the highest level of success. Other disadvantages that are rooted within the sport systems are much more difficult to navigate and create additional hurdles for athletes. Discriminatory policies are one just piece of the large systemic puzzle of inequality that hinders the inclusion of transgender athletes. Other aspects are the gender norms discussed throughout this study that are often reinforced in the athletic realm. These norms not only impact the lives of trans individuals but also cis female athletes. My personal perspective is that cisgender athletes must fight for full equality for trans athletes. In doing so, might they also understand the oppressive systems that have created the model of the female athlete that very few truly fall within. By supporting and fighting for trans men and women athletes, all individuals participating in competitive sports will benefit.

Limitations of the Study

The surveys and interviews had unique limitations that likely influenced the findings of this research. To reach members of the specific population being studied, I used social media to reach as many transgender athletes as possible. This eliminated the inclusion of trans individuals

who did not have access to or who do not utilize social media platforms. More importantly, the group of athletes who responded to the recruitment flyer reported during the interviews that they were seeking increased visibility and the chance to be ambassadors for the transgender community. Although I reached out to a very large community of trans athletes, those who responded to the flyer certainly had specific motivations for doing so. In addition to increasing visibility and being ambassadors to the community, these individuals also wanted to share their experiences with others. Because of the limitations of the interview research, questions still remain concerning the rest of the trans athletic population including those who might still be struggling with their identity and are not yet confident or comfortable enough to openly discuss this with another person.

Although I personally limited the survey distribution for this research, it would have been more beneficial to survey every school within the state of Tennessee rather than the thirty included here. I initially chose to draw random schools from a hat to have a focused group of teachers and to minimize the scale of the survey distribution. While the responses were balanced between the East, Middle, and West regions, the research would have greatly benefitted from a survey that encompassed the entire state of Tennessee. Not only would this have produced a much greater body of information, it would also lend the evaluation to a more concrete understanding of the state as a whole.

Concerning the actual survey, there were additional questions that would have made a significant impact on the findings from the coaches. I would have liked to ask the coaches what their gender was, what sports they coached, and what gender of those sports they coached. It would have been important to understand if the survey responses varied between the gender of the coach. The research would also have benefitted from survey questions directly related to

trans women and trans men separately and the coaches' opinions concerning both. As mentioned, often opinions towards trans athletes vary greatly between these two groups. I anticipate the findings would have also reflected this difference.

Recommendations

As stakeholders in the lives of transgender athletes, coaches and other athletic administration should evaluate their own policies and athletic environments for possible improvements for all athletes, trans athletes included. Moreover, athletic departments can institute yearly trainings that educate employees on things such as gender neutral language and sensitivity towards trans athletes alongside their other yearly trainings. Coaches and administration can also speak directly with trans athletes to discover their requests for better mental health and safety on whichever team they play. As the interviewees noted, this can be as simple as a jersey that best suits their gender or the use of a correct pronoun or name. From afar, the discussion of accommodating transgender athletes can seem overwhelming, because the majority assumes a complete overhaul of the athletic department. In reality, accommodation is much simpler.

In addition to training, athletic departments need to evaluate their coaches and other athletic staff for possible discriminatory actions. The five interviewees reported that while leaders were their greatest allies, they were also the individuals who ignored their experiences and needs for safety. An easy first step for athletic departments would be to designate a safe person with whom individuals can communicate. This person should have increased training in the areas of marginalized athletes and sexual minorities. This liaison would not only be able to advocate for the athletes but also follow up with any complaints about discrimination by coaches, administration, or other athletes. This individual could be available to all athletes,

creating an open line of communication for athletes to share their concerns and possibly harmful circumstances. By instituting a safe liaison, any athletic programs that may have issues with discrimination and homophobia can identify the source of such hate and deal with them accordingly.

Suggestions for Further Research

As mentioned in previous chapters, the research on transgender athletes is rather minimal and tends to exclude the voices of the trans population. More researchers need to talk with trans athletes to understand their experiences and needs as young athletes trying to compete in high school and, eventually, college. Without this knowledge, the discussion around trans athletes is simply speculation. Researchers must also talk with other transgender youth, not just athletes, to identify ways to improve their mental health within school systems.

Although the survey in this study was rather small, it provided valuable information concerning the opinions of high school coaches in Tennessee. A duplicate survey of this kind should be distributed to all coaches, at the high school and collegiate level, to determine the climate towards transgender athletes around the country. A survey of this magnitude could provide ample information to inform the policies that states are attempting to institute nationwide.

Another study like this performed at the collegiate level would be very beneficial and likely produce very different findings. Some of the athletes interviewed competed in college and reported on these experiences most specifically. There are many more factors to consider at the collegiate level such as scholarship funding, room and board, and professional athletics after college. Certainly these factors will play a pivotal role in the conversation surrounding collegiate

transgender athletes. Researching trans athletes at the collegiate level can also highlight changes needed at the high school and middle school level.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Are you at least 18 years of age or older?
2. So when did you first begin playing sports?
3. What kind of sports do you like to play?
4. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience as an athlete?
5. Has your trans identity impacted this experience any?
6. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with other athletes, either teammates or competitors?
7. How would you describe your experience with policies that target transgender athletes?
8. If you're comfortable with doing so, can you tell me a little about your experience with transitioning and any pressures you may have felt surrounding this process?
9. Can you talk a little bit about your thoughts on gender and identity as it pertains to your own experiences?
10. If you could create a better future for trans athletes, what would that encompass?

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Are you 18 years of age or older?

What is your age?

- ☐ 18-25
- ☐ 26-35
- ☐ 36-45
- ☐ 46-55
- ☐ 56-65
- ☐ 66+

Do you coach a sport in a TN high school?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

This survey is concerning the new bill (HB 1572) introduced in TN that requires all athletes to compete in the category of sex they were assigned at birth.

1. I would rate my understanding of this bill

Very poor, Poor, Average, Good, Very good

2. My understanding of transgender athletes is

Very poor, Poor, Average, Good, Very Good

3. I have experience working with or coaching transgender athletes

Yes, No, Unsure

4. The climate towards sexual minorities in sports at my school is

Very negative, Negative, Neither negative or positive, Positive, Very positive

5. This new bill would impact my job as a coach

Highly unlikely, Unlikely, Unsure, Likely, Very likely

6. Transgender athletes should be allowed to compete in the gender category with which they identify

Strongly disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree, Strongly agree

7. Transgender athletes have an unfair advantage in sports

Strongly disagree, Disagree, Unsure, Agree, Strongly agree

8. Transgender athletes threaten the fairness of sport

Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither, Agree, Strongly agree

9. If this bill is passed in TN, I would

Strongly oppose it, Oppose it, Unsure, Support it, Strongly support it

VITA

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