

Trans Media Watch

# Media Representation of Trans Athletes

A Scoping Review of the lines of discourse pursued by the Mainstream  
UK Print Media when discussing Trans Athletes



# Media Representation of Trans Athletes

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## Introduction

This document explores coverage of transgender inclusion in sport, with the goal of exploring if the media representation of transgender athletes is:

- a fair representation of the theoretical and scientific findings;
- a fair representation of the range of discourse available around this topic.

Historically, cisgender women have faced disadvantage when compared to their male counterparts. A perfect example is the legacy of the Victorian 'urinary leash', which refers to a lack of public facilities available for women, meaning they were often unable to venture too far from the home. This legacy and the decades of activism that ensued meant that, from the perspectives of some strands of feminist discourse, 'women's only spaces' are seen as something that has been hard fought for (Jones & Slater, 2020, Molotch, 2010). As a result, there is some resistance from those who adhere to this view towards the introduction of inclusive or gender free spaces. This resistance often stems from the fear associated with male intrusion in female spaces.

This also extends to the sporting world. With women's sport often poorly resourced and overlooked, any victory gained has been hard won. Historically, female athletes have been exposed to intrusive, unnecessary, and embarrassing processes to ascertain their suitability for competing in the female category. This included mandatory nude parades in which officials would inspect the genitalia of athletes to establish if they were suitable for the event. As the understanding of science and gender has developed, gender verification processes have developed but continue to be surrounded by ethical concerns, and have the potential to be dehumanising or demeaning for those subjected to them (Wiesemann,



2011). We have moved from chromosome testing that produced many false positives to the current policy of measuring testosterone levels in the blood, which has been used to vilify any athlete whose testosterone levels are outside an arbitrarily decided 'norm'.

The focus on categorisation has created a very binary sporting system that can be seen as unwelcoming and intolerant of those who are outside of the hetero/cisnormative expectation. This results in transgender, non-binary, and intersex athletes being seen as a problem that needs to be dealt with. This narrative is often driven by specific groups and the ever-widening divide between trans-inclusive feminism and those who have branded themselves as 'gender-critical' feminists. According to the latter, 'biological sex' is a fixed and essential foundation of feminism; and therefore, the inclusion of trans individuals (more specifically trans women) is incompatible with the premise of feminism and womanhood (Pearce, Erikainen & Vincent, 2020). By contrast, those who advocate for a trans-inclusive feminist approach perceive biological as broadly female or male, with some people having intersex variations, but assert that the inclusion of trans and non-binary people in feminist spaces can only strengthen the experience of all (Hines & Sanger, 2010).

Research conducted and published by Trans Media Watch also shows an almost unbelievable level of focus – TMW have described it as an obsession – by the media on reporting on the minutiae of trans existence. From a total of approx. 60 articles a year published by major UK media outlets in 2012, this rose to over 7,000 in 2022. The majority of these appear to be written from a hostile perspective, and almost half were published in just three news outlets: The Times, Telegraph and Daily Mail.

### Purpose of the review



The discussion on how to approach transgender inclusion in sport may seem ever present. However, for many years, inclusion of trans individuals in the gender category appropriate to their gender was taken as a settled question. It is only recently, following intense media ‘concern,’ that this has become an issue, and increasingly involved in ways that penalise trans participants in sport. For example, governing bodies such as the International Swimming Federation (FINA) and the Rugby League have banned trans athletes from competing in female events (Pink News, 2022). Others, such as British Triathlon have attempted to create open categories for trans inclusion. However, as this is primarily done by renaming the men’s event there are many who argue this is still not very inclusive.

The purpose of this document is not to offer opinion on trans inclusion in sport but only to investigate if the media representation of trans athletes is fair and accurate, and whether it includes a broad range of discourse. Discussion and discourse around a subject should represent all viewpoints, while acknowledging the power dynamics and social biases that may influence how and whether all voices are heard.

This review will therefore investigate:

- how trans athletes are represented in the media;
- whether the narrative presented in the media aligns with current scientific evidence;
- whether it presents a broad range of discourse and opinion on the topic.

It will also present recommendations for the media industry on how they can ensure trans athletes are represented fairly and accurately.

Key terminology



Some of the specific terminology regarding transgender athletes may be unfamiliar. Below is a glossary of key terms used in this document.

**Ally/Allies** – Individuals from the majority group who are supportive of the minority group and actively act to protect individuals in minority groups. For the purposes of this document allies are cisgendered people who are actively supportive of the transgender community.

**Cisgender** – an umbrella term to refer to anyone who identifies as a gender that aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Deadnaming** – the practise of referring to a trans individual by the name they were assigned at birth rather than their preferred name. This is widely seen as a means whereby mainstream media de-validate a trans individual's identity.

**Gender** – a social construct relating to how an individual feels about themselves and how they express themselves. In most cases this will align with the sex an individual is assigned at birth, but in some cases it does not.

**Intersex** – individuals born with genitalia, chromosomes, or other gender characteristics that make their bodies difficult to categorise as normatively male or female, sometimes referred to as disorders of sexual development.

**Misgendering** – the practise of referring to a trans individual by the incorrect gender or pronouns. This can be accidental. However, it is also seen as a means by which the media seek to invalidate a trans individual's identity.



Non-binary – an umbrella term to refer to anyone who identifies as a gender outside of the binary female/male model. Examples include ‘non-binary’, ‘genderfluid’, or ‘agender’.

Sex – the biological category assigned to an individual at birth based on external genitalia, chromosomes, or other gender characteristics.

Transsexual – the original use of this term was interchangeable with transgender; it is now seen as an outdated and offensive term due to its association with the idea that those who were trans needed to be seeking or undergoing medical transition to be valid as a trans person.

Transgender/Trans – an umbrella term to refer to anyone who identifies as a gender different from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transition – the process that a transgender individual undergoes to live as their true gender. This may involve social transition (change of name, dress, hair, etc.). It also includes medical interventions, such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and/or surgery. However, the law does not require that transition be medical, and a trans individual is just as valid regardless of if they pursue this, or not.

### About Trans Media Watch

Trans Media Watch (TMW) is a British charity founded in 2009 to encourage the accurate and respectful media coverage of transgender and intersex people, and related issues. By improving media coverage, TMW strives to “foster social acceptance and civil recognition for trans persons,” and to prevent the “material consequences” of misrepresentation. TMW





have commissioned this document as a part of their work on the media representation of transgender athletes and transgender inclusion in sport.

### About the researchers

Kevin Palmer gained his MA in Social Research from the University of Sheffield in 2022. His dissertation project centred around LGBTQ+ healthcare and how well-suited services in England are in serving the needs of LGBTQ+ patients, primarily from the perspectives of medical practitioners. In future studies, he intends to go further into this topic and look into this from the perspectives of patients and find ways to improve these outcomes.



## Methodology

### Searches

In July 2022 online scoping searches of nine major UK newspapers' websites were conducted (Daily Mail, The Times, The Telegraph, The Metro, The Guardian, The Sun, iNews, The Daily Mirror and The Daily Express). Searches were conducted using 9 search terms to identify articles relating to transgender athletes, 5 of these search terms were related to gender or sex (Trans\*, Transgender, Transexual, Non-binary, Intersex) and 4 were related to sport (Athlete, Sport\*, Physical Activity, Exercise). A total of 290 articles were identified that specifically focused on reporting a story relating to transgender athletes in sport.

### Analysis

Thematic and narrative analysis was undertaken on the 290 articles identified, to identify what key themes within articles about transgender athletes in sport were present. To mitigate for potential bias, a second researcher undertook a coding process in isolation, in which they also read every article and highlighted the key themes. The coding process required researchers to read the article and name any key arguments or narratives. These were then grouped based on similarity into key themes that were present across a large percentage of the articles. Following the completion of the first stage of coding, findings were amalgamated into the main themes presented in this document.



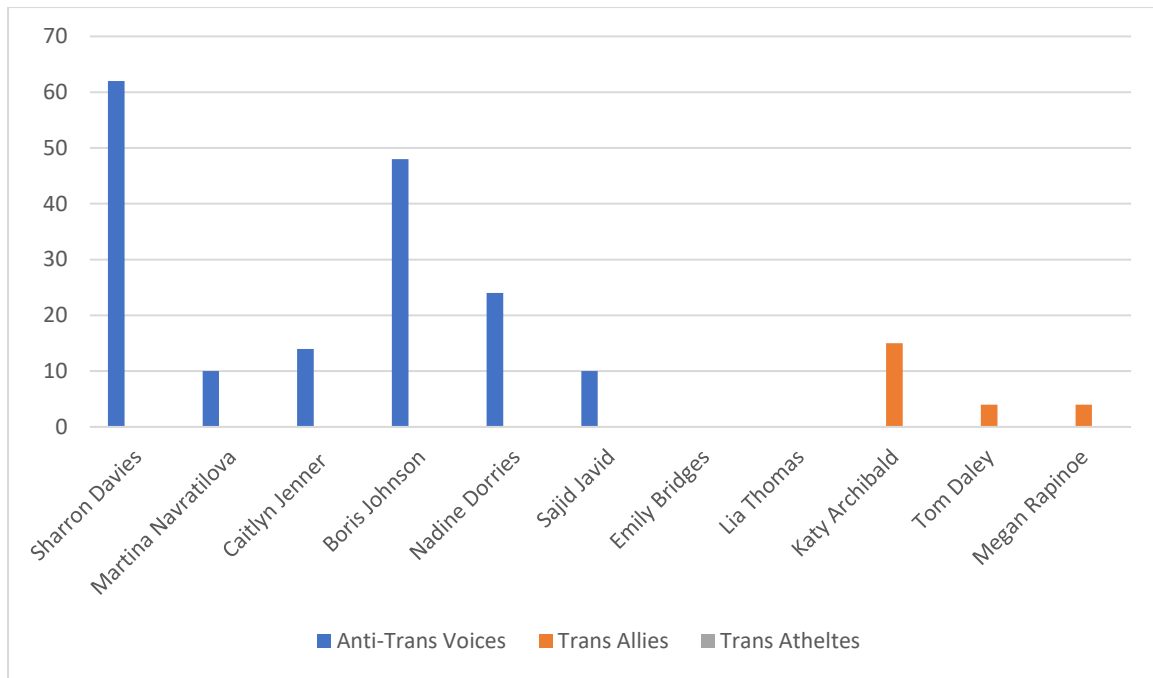
## Results

### Basic overview

A total of 290 articles were analysed from nine major UK newspapers' websites: Daily Mail (N=75), The Telegraph (N=53), The Times (N=46), The Guardian (N=43), The Daily Express (N=25), The Daily Mirror (N=16), The Metro (N=15), The Sun (N=10) and I News (N=7). When exploring which voices were represented there was a clear skew towards the perspectives of trans exclusionary voices. Of the articles reviewed 34% (N=99) articles reported the pro-trans voices from both athletes and allies, and 46% (N=133) reported anti-trans voices. Of the quotes from those who were pro trans inclusion 23% (N=67) were the direct perspective of a transgender athlete and 11% (N=32) were of cisgender allies' perspectives. In most articles that reported a direct perspective of a transgender athlete, the individual cited was either British elite cyclist Emily Bridges or American collegiate swimmer Lia Thomas. Of the articles directly quoting Bridges or Thomas it is difficult to establish which were using 'exclusive' quotes as most of them were recycled from the same few interviews or tweets. In addition, most of the coverage focused on the debate around whether cycling governing bodies would allow Bridges to compete in a National Omnium Championships, or Lia Thomas's success at the NCCA championships. In the articles that directly quoted cisgender allies, the main supportive comments were from American footballer Megan Rapinoe and Olympic diver Tom Daley. Additionally, Olympic cyclist Katie Archibald was vocal in her support of transgender inclusion but caveated the statement to insist inclusion must not be put above fairness. In the articles that reported quotes calling for trans exclusion from sport, the vast majority were from former Olympic swimmer Sharron Davies, former professional tennis player Martina Navratilova, and politicians Boris Johnson and Nadine Dorries.



## Media Representation of Trans Athletes



Through the analysis, 4 major themes were identified:

- Fairness;
- Vilification;
- Safety;
- Inclusion.

**Fairness:** 93% (N=270) of articles presented a narrative questioning the fairness of transgender inclusion in competitive sport, primarily suggesting that trans female athletes hold an unfair advantage over cisgender female athletes.

**Vilification:** 86% (N=248) of articles presented narratives or used reporting styles designed to directly vilify trans athletes such as suggesting they were knowingly cheating, deadnaming or using pictures of the athlete pre-transition.

**Safety:** 14% (N=42) of articles presented a narrative suggesting the inclusion of trans athletes was a safety concern, specifically that the inclusion of trans women in women's sport could directly put female athletes in danger.

**Inclusion:** only 9% (N=27) of articles presented a narrative of the positive inclusion of trans athletes, primarily suggesting ways in which trans athletes could be included in competitive sport.

### Fairness

The concept of fairness was recurrent throughout the articles which this study explored. Out of the 290 articles, 208 (71.72%) of them directly expressed the viewpoint that there was an issue with transgender athletes having an unfair advantage over their cisgender



counterparts. This focussed exclusively on the notion of transgender female athletes having a supposed 'unfair' advantage, rather than any reference being made to transgender male athletes. The online source which engaged with this rhetoric the most was the Daily Mail, with 64 out of the 75 articles (85.33%) sampled referencing this. One voice pushing this narrative which was platformed more than any other was that of former Olympian, Sharron Davies. Overall, Davies was quoted in 61 out of the 290 articles (21.03%). One example of the quotes included was:

*"It's not transphobic to want fair sport - it's anti-female to not... It would not have been fair to ask Laura Kenny and the other women cyclists that Bridges would have come up against to have to race a rival with the advantages of a biological man. No amount of testosterone reduction can mitigate that, but we're being told to turn a blind eye to science and biology, to keep quiet and suck it up."*

What was perhaps even more striking was how comparatively few of the articles gave the perspectives of trans athletes themselves. Only 67 articles (23.1%) used any quotes from trans athletes, scarcely more than the number of articles which quoted Davies alone. Of these quotes, many were lifted from other sources or tweets from trans athletes. Very few were from conversations which directly engaged with trans athletes and took the time to portray their lived experiences. The notion of fairness led into other areas of society where the notion of 'unfairness' in sport also touched upon other issues in which transgender individuals could have their rights curtailed. For example, one article from the Telegraph wove these two trans-hostile ideas into the same sequence, referencing views shared by then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. They wrote:



*'Boris Johnson has said he does not think "biological males should be competing in women's sports", as he set out his position on transgender issues. The Prime Minister said the "sensible" view was that transgender athletes- such as Lia Thomas, a swimmer who won America's top trophy in university sports last month - should not be allowed to compete alongside biological women and that children should not be allowed to decide their own gender without parental assistance.'*

These two seemingly unrelated perspectives – one referring to perceived 'unfairness' in sport and the other implying that transgender children should not be able to socially transition without parental approval – portray perfectly how arguments over trans-exclusionary practices in sports often originate from wider trans-hostile outlooks. These seep into other areas across society and can result in exclusionary practices that make the lives of transgender individuals more difficult, as well as greater barriers to acceptance.

Whilst there is a sizeable body of research that highlights the biological advantage of cisgender males over cisgender females, there is very little research explicitly exploring the potential advantage of trans athletes. For instance, research supporting decline in physical strength, bone mass, etc. following MTF transition is regularly ignored/not cited (Figuera, T.M., Ziegelmann, P.K., Rasia da Silva, T., et al., 2019).

In addition, it is argued that the cis male advantage is not uniform across all sports; that in fact, there are sports where cis women outperform cis males, as well as team sports where mixed teams are not inappropriate.



## Safety

The notion of 'safety' was a concern which was raised throughout a number of the articles investigated in this study. Many pieces implied that trans athletes would be a physical threat to their cisgendered peers if they were allowed to compete in the same categories. Out of the 290 articles, this premise was identified as prevalent to arguments made in 42 of them (14.48%). The argument was most common in the Daily Telegraph, with 20.75% of articles on the subject incorporating this notion. One example of this came from a quotation sourced from Sharron Davies. She said:

*"This is a serious accident waiting to happen and they just don't seem to care that they're potentially risking injury to female athletes, as well as condoning unfair sport."*

It is noteworthy that arguments around 'fairness' are also woven into this narrative of trans athletes being a threat to the safety of cisgender athletes. This also corresponds with a vilification of trans rights activists as well as trans athletes themselves. For example, in an article entitled, 'TRANS ROW: Brit women boxers could face nightmare if they're forced to fight transgenders with row tearing sport apart', the author depicts transgender female boxers as extreme threats to the safety of cisgender female boxers while also painting trans activists as violent and threatening. They wrote:

*"Even militant trans activists, who have been known to hand out death threats to those who oppose them, have the good sense to understand it would be extremely dangerous to permit transgenders to fight competitively."*





Within this, trans activists are painted as dangerous extremists, while simultaneously declaring that even this group agreed that trans boxers were a threat to the safety of women. By weaving these arguments of perceived unfairness together while also painting both trans athletes and trans activists as dangerous extremists who are to be feared, these articles, combined with the sheer volume of their publication, continue to contribute to a culture of prejudice and bullying towards transgender communities (Stonewall, 2023).

### Vilification

This negative depiction of transgender individuals and activists, both in the field of sporting competitions and in wider society, was clearly apparent in the articles covered in this study. It took several forms, including deadnaming trans athletes and using pictures of them pre-transition. For instance, 22 articles were involved in deadnaming, while 37 used pre-transition images of athletes. This was often directed at transgender cyclist, Emily Bridges. Such coverage can be seen as particularly disrespectful towards transgender individuals and was often coupled with arguments which implied that the authors did not respect the identities of those they were covering.

38 articles have been categorised according to this trait. One example of this came in an article from The Sun discussing trans swimmer, Lia Thomas, in which an exchange is recounted between spectators at an event in which Thomas was competing. They wrote:

*'In an extraordinary scene at the poolside as Thomas stormed to victory, a British woman named Kelly-Jay Keen from activist group Standing For Women got into an argument with a male spectator after asking (about Thomas), 'Is his body the same as the other girls in the pool?' When the man replied, 'Every body is different', Keen*



*retorted, 'No. Are you saying he doesn't have male organs? I'm a woman - that is not a woman. Do you have ovaries? I'm a woman, and that is not a woman.'*"

This corresponds with an essentialist perspective of sex and gender, where the notion of what a woman is and what they can be is perceived as having to exist within strict biological and social metrics (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020). From there, whether they are trans or cisgender, those who do not conform to this specific notion can often be victims of vilification. In the articles investigated as part of this study, this often took the form of accusations of cheating and undermining the fairness of sporting competitions. In several articles, Sharron Davies likened the idea of trans athletes being able to compete in sporting events with that of taking performance enhancing drugs. She was quoted in one article from The Times as saying:

*"As a swimmer who faced the androgenised girls of East Germany at every turn in my first career in the pool, I feel the treatment of women in the debate over trans inclusion in sport adds insult to injury... It all brings back horrid memories of women being robbed of a fair playing field and life-long opportunities, and of anyone who spoke up for justice being told to keep quiet or pay a price. Mitigating every biological male advantage is the only way, otherwise it's like saying 'we allow a little bit of doping', which isn't allowed in men's sport so why should it be allowed in women's sport in another name?"*

Overall, this argument of trans athletes using their perceived biological advantages as a method of 'cheating' was employed 35 times across these articles.

For trans athletes, this type of vilification is explored throughout the literature on this topic.

Gibbs-Nicholls and Mellick (2022) commented on the effects that discrimination, such as



that expressed in the articles examined in this study, can have on trans athletes and their willingness to participate in sporting activities. They wrote:

*“For trans athletes, the discrimination often experienced through sport can significantly impact their prolonged engagement in physical activity, sport participation, and mental health”* (Gibbs-Nicholls and Mellick, 2022, p.87).

These organisational structures that sporting bodies have created in which athletes must conform to the cisgender hegemony are in direct conflict with the notion of moving between gendered categories, thus reinforcing and reflecting the gender binary which is used to organise much of our society (Stryker and Whittle, 2006). Moreover, it can be argued that these structures are designed to cause a great deal of psychological stress for trans individuals looking to compete in sporting competitions, ‘punishing’ them for not fitting into their socially constructed categories (Tagg, 2012).

The ways in which trans athletes’ intentions in the articles reviewed in this study were represented is a further example of this power imbalance where dominant versions of gender expression and identity are rewarded while others who fall under the trans umbrella are vilified (Yarbrough, 2021). Therefore, despite some improvements in the way trans individuals have been represented in the media in recent years, trans communities continue to be represented negatively by these outlets and governing bodies (Van Haelter, Dhaenens, and Van Bauwel, 2022).



### Inclusion

Although they were in a minority of the articles investigated here (9.31%), there were some instances of articles which touched upon sporting practices that were inclusive of transgender athletes. The articles which can be seen to have portrayed this most effectively were ones which gave platforms to trans athletes themselves and allowed them to describe their own lived experiences, as opposed to merely being written about by the cisgendered majority. One excellent example of this came in an article from the Metro, detailing the experiences of a football team made up exclusively of transgender women who were due to take part in their first ever match. Paula, one of the players in this team, was quoted as saying:

*'It is so life affirming and brilliant to be accepted as a transgender woman in the world of football and the fact we are actually now playing a professional match is a dream come true... It is the first professional game I have played since I transitioned and I think we stand a really good chance of winning. The other team are so supportive of us and there has been only positive vibes from them. I was always worried I may not be accepted as someone who wanted to play football but that couldn't be further from the truth.'*

This story is a good example as how sport can embrace transgender individuals at a grassroots level and be inclusive of them. However, as shown above, it is often more difficult for inclusive attitudes to be put into practice when it comes to higher levels of sporting competition. A good example of a sporting body taking a trans-inclusive approach came in an article from The Guardian in which the German football federation were



reported to have announced that transgender, intersex, and non-binary players would be able to decide whether to play in men's or women's teams. In a statement on this issue, the federation said:

*'It also applies to transgender players who can now switch at a self-determined time or remain initially in the team in which they'd been playing previously... As long as the sporting activity does not affect the health of the person while they are taking medication, the person can take part in the game, which is why the new regulation excludes doping relevance.'*

This is a rare example of one of the articles included in this study reporting on a sporting body being inclusive towards transgender athletes, creating a culture which is more likely to increase trans participation, as opposed to other sporting bodies which have actively sought to create additional barriers.

As stated above, inclusive actions from sporting bodies and individuals often created an environment in which trans athletes could feel more comfortable and accepted, thus allowing them to prosper in the sporting arena. Moreover, in all walks of life where attitudes are gender-affirming rather than hostile, and organisational policies which aim to be inclusive towards trans individuals are put into place, trans people are more likely to prosper and have higher levels of achievement (Bozani *et al.*, 2019). Greey (2023) also argues that trans exclusion from sport closes this arena off from embracing new ways of thinking about how it is structured. They wrote:

*"What do we communicate to young athletes, I wonder, if we categorically exclude all competitors who were assigned the incorrect gender at birth? This exclusion does*



*not only harm trans athletes – though it disproportionately harms this group- it also diminishes our collective imaginary of gendered possibilities” (Greey, 2023, pp.8-9).*

In promoting greater openness in allowing trans and non-binary athletes to compete, rather than distorting the existing hegemony in a way that damages sporting integrity, this greater diversity has the potential to enrich sporting narratives and empower all of those involved (Gleaves and Lehrbach, 2016). This notion of reimagining of how sporting competitions are designed, although seemingly far away from an immediate reality based on the articles investigated in this study, perhaps corresponds to a longer-term goal in creating a sporting environment which does not so strictly segregate by gender and subsequently empowers both trans athletes and cisgendered women alike (Tännsjö, 2000).

### Missing Discourse

As noted in the previous section and throughout this paper, the findings of this study indicate that the media outlets investigated in this study had a disproportionate level of focus on trans people – particularly transgender women – taking part in elite levels of competitive sport, with the vast majority of these narratives being driven towards the conclusion that this was a threat to the future of fair and safe sporting competition for women.

However, it is important also to highlight areas of investigation which have had far less focus and could be looked at in the future.

### Social Function

With the primary focus being almost exclusively on elite sports, there was very little interest shown in the inclusion of transgender participants at a grassroots or youth level. Nor any recognition of how such inclusion functions to help trans individuals maintain social networks through transition.



One positive example of this came in March 2023 when a grassroots football team made up entirely of trans-masculine individuals played their first ever match against a men's team (Pink News, 2023). This was particularly ground-breaking since it was the first time that an exclusively trans-masculine team had been formed and played a match in Europe. The captain of the team, Arthur Webber, spoke about his experiences growing up as trans and barriers to taking part in sport. He said:

*"I played for the boys' team up until I moved to secondary school, and in secondary school everything became sex-segregated, so I played for a women's team then for a couple of years before finding out what trans was... Then I was like, 'Oh s\*\*t, I can't do this anymore', and I gave up [football] until I moved to London last year"* (Pink News, 2023).

This statement from Webber cites an area of exploration which was not magnified in the articles investigated in this study – the possibility of non-gender segregated sports at youth and grassroots levels, scrutinising the notion as to whether such differentiation is strictly necessary. For trans or gender nonconforming people like Arthur, this binary segregation based on gender has provided a huge barrier to participation. In future studies, this potentially arbitrary ruling, which has been implemented and passively accepted as the norm by many, should be scrutinised. This may open up discussions for mixed or semi-mixed gendered sporting activities away from elite competition, taking away these barriers to entry.

In addition, narratives that demonise and attack leading trans sportswomen erase the human being and the struggles they have been through. Emily Bridges was quoted as saying, "We're the current punching bag populist movements like to go for. We are, at the moment, who the culture war is against." This punching down on transgender athletes is likely to have severe negative effects not just on their mental and physical wellbeing, but also on less 'elite' trans athletes.

Thus, the backlash that athletes like Bridges have felt from looking to compete in the female category may also have ramifications for other transgender individuals, who may be put off getting into sport at any level for fear of similar negativity – or effectively banned altogether (Sky Sports, 2023). Coupling this barrier to trans participation in sports with the already



reported underrepresentation of trans athletes at elite level (Kavoura and Kokkonen, 2020), it is not too far a reach to see how this lack of participation is likely to continue and exacerbate already high levels of exclusion felt by trans people in society.

What is missing, when narratives revolve around trans people ‘invading’ women’s sports and ‘undermining’ their integrity, are narratives that celebrate the achievements of trans people in taking part and thriving in the sporting arena despite the aforementioned barriers.

Also ignored is the fact that the vast majority of trans people who wish to continue to do sport post-transition, do so because sport fulfils a social function for them – not because they wish to be world-class medal winners.

### Actual Representation

It is also worth noting that, in contrast to the narratives pushed in the vast majority of articles investigated in this study, transgender individuals have been underrepresented in elite sport and continue to be in spite of the current media backlash (Kavoura and Kokkonen, 2020).

Discussing this in reference to the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Harper and colleagues (2018), noted that this apparent influx of transgender athletes had not materialised in actuality in the arena of elite sports. They wrote:

*“Transgender women are majorly underrepresented in elite level sport. For instance, there were approximately 4700 female competitors and 460 female medal winners in the Rio Olympic Games. Assuming that transgender individuals make up approximately 0.6% of the population, then there should have been 20 to 25 transgender women competitors and two or three medal winners at the 2016 Olympics. In contrast to this, no openly transgender athlete has ever competed in any Olympic Games, let alone won a medal” (Harper et al., 2018).*

Therefore, rather than media narratives revolving around the apparent threat transgender athletes are to the integrity of elite sports, an alternative perspective would see this narrative completely turned around. There should be investigations as to why there are so





few transgender athletes competing at the top of their professions and what barriers have been put in place which have produced this disparity.

‘It’s not the winning...’

*“The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part.”* That famous statement, attributed to Pierre de Coubertin, the father of modern Olympic Games, makes clear what he – and many of his contemporaries – thought the Olympics was about.

*Perhaps less commonly reported is how he continued. That is, he went on to say: “the important thing in Life is not triumph, but the struggle; the essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well. To spread these principles is to build up a strong and more valiant and, above all, more scrupulous and more generous humanity.”*

However, apart from the very occasional comment piece exploring this – and usually marked out as countering the popular consensus – this thinking is almost entirely absent from current media coverage of (trans people in) sport.

What do we mean by ‘advantage’

Media narratives with regards to transgender athletes frame ‘fairness’ and ‘advantage’ in a very particular, trans-specific way.

For example, transgender athletes like Lia Thomas and Emily Bridges are regularly painted as having inherently unfair advantages and are compared in some cases to athletes who had taken performance enhancing drugs.

That alone is an entire area for wider discourse and interrogation. For it presumes not just a cisnormative hierarchy in sport, but a very particular hierarchy dependent on the mix of chemicals present within the individual participant.



This is challenged, mostly in the comedy arena, by performers proposing an Olympics-with and an Olympics-without chemical enhancement. However, other more serious commenters have engaged with the issue – though rarely in the pages of the mainstream media.

As already noted, the mainstream media mostly do not challenge the commonplace assumptions that:

- Trans women retain the advantages of being born with a 'male biology', although there is much evidence to show such advantage is significantly reduced on transition;
- Across all sport, cis males maintain an 'obvious' advantage over cis females.

Also almost wholly absent from media discourse are questions about naturally occurring gene advantage. Exceptions exist, as in a Washington Post article (Hesse, 2019), which questions why a cis white male swimmer, Michael Phelps, is celebrated for his genetic differences, while Caster Semenya, a black woman believed to be intersex, is punished for hers. Perhaps, given advances in gene-mapping, the day will come when questions are raised, too, over the unfair advantages possessed by individuals such as Phelps.

## Recommendations

For the media to cover sport 'fairly', there are several changes they need to make to their sports coverage.

1. They should look to hear from trans athletes themselves. As detailed in the previous sections, most articles looked at in this study came from the perspectives of



cisgender individuals, many of whom had a clearly vested interest in being disparaging towards trans athletes and the trans community in general. Moreover, when a trans athlete was quoted directly in an article, it was often used at the end of an overtly trans-hostile piece, with quotations frequently recycled from the individual's Twitter account rather than from consulting them directly for comments. Therefore, as well as coverage on this topic requiring a better balance of transgender voices, it is also important that media bodies go further to gaining in-depth understandings of the trans perspective via more rigorous research methods, such as interviews and questionnaires. In doing this, they will be able to provide more authentic and representative pictures of the lived experiences of trans athletes.

2. We would recommend that newspapers and other media bodies not report on this topic nearly as frequently and repetitively as they currently do. For example, between 27<sup>th</sup> March 2022 and 19<sup>th</sup> July 2022, the Daily Mail released 75 online articles on the subject of transgender athletes in sport. Many of these articles covered the same themes, reused quotes, and provided a homogeneity of viewpoints. This onslaught of trans-hostile narratives over such a short period of time speaks of a clear agenda that is being pushed, with this synchronising with other news outlets simultaneously releasing output along the same lines. This is an unnecessary amount of focus put upon trans communities, who are already extremely vulnerable to societal and legal discrimination.
3. There is a range of other counter-perspectives that they are simply not including right now. It would make sense, on the grounds of the oft-quoted media 'balance' and 'fairness', for them to engage in such arguments and provide the public with the opportunity to consider them.





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