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Governing Bodies: Trans Politics, Embodiment, and Critique in Sports

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Feminist Studies

by

CJ E. Jones

Committee in charge:

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December 2021

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Governing Bodies: Trans Politics, Embodiment, and Critique in Sports

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by

CJ E. Jones

DEDICATION

For my parents.

Thank you for your sacrifices and for supporting my dreams.

VITA OF CJ E. JONES
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ABSTRACT

Governing Bodies: Trans Politics, Embodiment, and Critique in Sports

by

CJ E. Jones

This dissertation uses a mixed-methods approach to examine the conditions that enable opposition to transwomen participating in women's athletics. I draw upon interviews that I conducted with eleven transwomen athletes who train and compete in various sports; participant-observation at lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender sporting events; autoethnography of my experience as a gender non-conforming athlete; and discourse analysis of cultural representations of trans athletes in news outlets, social media, trans-exclusionary groups. This project is one entry point to bring sport within the scope of trans studies and seeks to model a closer conversation between feminist sports studies and trans studies, or what I call transfeminist sports studies.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Toward a Transfeminist Sports Studies

Since 2019, state legislatures in the United States have dramatically increased legal efforts against transgender students playing sports, introducing almost seventy bills with names such as “Biological Sex; Interscholastic Athletics,”¹ “Save Women’s Sports Act,”² and “Fairness in Women’s Sports Act.”³ A defeated Utah bill would have allowed plaintiffs to sue a school and athletic association if they felt harmed by a trans kid playing on their sports team.⁴ A Minnesota bill would criminalize trans kids for playing on a sports team or using a locker room that matches their gender identity.⁵ As of July 2021, eight states have laws that require student-athletes to play on a sports team according to the sex they were assigned at birth.⁶

This wave of ongoing legislation arrives on the heels of 2016-2017 “bathroom bills”, the most notorious of which was North Carolina’s H.B. 2 that restricted “access to multiuser

¹ Arizona Legislature, Senate, *Biological sex; Interscholastic athletics*, SB 1637, 55th legislature, 1st session, died on June 30, 2021.

² South Carolina Legislature, House, *Save Women’s Sports Act*, SC H4153, 124th General Assembly, In committee April 4, 2021; North Carolina Legislature, House, *Save Women’s Sports Act*, NC HB 358, 2021-2022 Session, In committee April 26, 2021.

³ New Jersey Legislature, Senate, “Fairness in Women’s Sports Act,” NJ S3540, 2020-2021 Regular Session, in Senate Education Committee March 11, 2021.

⁴ Utah Legislature, House, “Preserving Sports for Female Students,” HB 302, 2021 General Session, Died March 5, 2021.

⁵ Minnesota Legislature, House, Male student participation in female athletics restricted, male access to female changing facilities restricted, and criminal penalties provided, MN HF1657, 92nd Legislature 2021-2022, In committee February 25, 2021.

⁶ Transathlete, “Take Action.”

restrooms, locker rooms, and other sex-segregated facilities on the basis of a definition of sex or gender consistent with sex assigned at birth or “biological sex.”⁷ Many of these bathroom bills were otherwise broadly conceived as antidiscrimination and equal rights bills that addressed issues such as employment, public accommodations, and housing. But opposition to these bills coalesced at the site of the public bathroom, specifically the women’s bathroom.

The brief period of bathroom bills provided the pretext for current controversy over transwomen athletes. Even though several of these bills encompass trans men—and would mandate them to play on women’s and girls’ teams—exponentially more attention is directed at transwomen playing women’s sports. To be clear, laws that force any trans person to play on a team that matches the gender they were assigned at birth is a form of violence that rejects trans personhood. But as the name “Save Women’s Sports” suggests, transwomen are viewed as an existential threat to women and girls’ sports.

The central question that this dissertation explores is why transwomen are the focus of this controversy and what this controversy tells us about the normative linkages between gender, sex, and sport. Sport lays bare some of the most entrenched notions of gendered bodily performance, capacity, and materiality in such a way that even self-proclaimed left-leaning folks who identify as trans-friendly cannot always dislodge them. The buck often stops at sports. In the chapters that follow, I focus almost exclusively on transwomen not because trans men are inconsequential in this debate, but because the disproportionate amount of attention, fear, and anger directed at transwomen athletes is also precisely the reason *why* trans men seem to be inconsequential in this debate. In other words, this

⁷ The “bathroom” component of the law was repealed in 2017. The entire bill was repealed in 2020 (Kralik).

disproportionality has as much to do with transphobia as it does sexism. In the next section I offer a short overview of the history of the surveillance of women's bodies in sports and the perpetual constriction of their athleticism. This history reflects, and has set the stage for, how transwomen's bodies are policed in women's sports today.

How We Got Here: A Brief History of Gender and Sports

The athlete that has arguably received the most attention in the past decade is Caster Semenya, a South African sprinter whose sex and gender were subjected to debate after she won the gold medal in the 800 meters at the 2009 World Championships. Semenya produces more testosterone than what is typically associated with a ciswoman's range (a topic that I address in depth in chapter 1) and therefore has been barred by the International Olympic Committee and World Athletics (formerly IAAF) from competing in her signature race, the 800 meters, unless she pharmaceutically reduces her testosterone or has a gonadectomy.⁸ But unfortunately, ostracizing regulations against women's bodies began long before Semenya.

Women were barred from the 1896⁹ Olympics because Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, argued that women competing would be “impractical, uninteresting, ungainly, and...improper.”¹⁰ As the International Olympics Committee (IOC) slowly expanded the range of events in which women were allowed to participate, Olympic personnel, media, and athletes themselves suspected that certain Olympians were too

⁸ “Pharmaceutical intervention” or a gonadectomy are the two ways of lowering testosterone (Karkazis et al., “Out of Bounds?,” 5).

⁹ I start in 1896 because it marks the first Olympic Games of the modern era and because women were specifically banned from playing.

¹⁰ Coubertin in Pieper, *Sex Testing*, 15.

“manly.” For example, Japanese runner Hitomi Kinue had broken several records as a teenager and eventually won the silver medal in the 1928 Games. Hitomi’s athletic excellence led many journalists covering the Games that year to surmise that she could not possibly be a woman.¹¹ Other women similarly were subjected to scrutiny, such as U.S. athletes Babe Didrikson and Helen Stephens; Polish runner Stella Walsh; and German high jumper Dora Ratjen. What led to further panic within the IOC and IAAF was the medical transition of Zdenek Koubek and Mark Edward Louis Weston a few years after their careers competing in women’s track and field events in the 1930s. The panic stemmed from a concern that women playing sport was having a masculinizing effect on them. This worry was especially directed at track and field because mostly black and working-class women participated in these events. As such, race and class inflected this panic over masculinization in a moment when upper-class women—if they did play sports—steered more toward golf, archery, and tennis.¹² As a result, both the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) in 1946 and the IOC in 1948 established that in order to compete, women athletes must submit a letter from their doctor that verified they were women.

Although athletes were required to bring their “femininity certificates” to competition in the 1940s and 1950s, international governing bodies discerned that verification by team and family physicians was no longer sufficient.¹³ Sanctioned sex testing of women athletes first took place at the European Athletics Championships in Budapest in 1966 and again at the 1967 Pan-American Games. Testing consisted of visual inspection of women’s genitals

¹¹ Pieper, 29.

¹² Schultz, *Qualifying Times*, 105; Pieper, 16, 30.

¹³ Heggie, “Testing Sex and Gender in Sports,” 159.

or “naked parades,” but at the 1966 Commonwealth Games athletes were subject to physical inspections as well. In 1968 the IOC adopted the Barr Body test, which shows whether cells from a cheek swab contain XX or XY sex chromosomes, which operated for over two decades until Spanish hurdler Maria José Martínez-Patiño “failed” the test. Martínez-Patiño is a woman, has XY chromosomes, and androgen insensitivity syndrome, where her body is either completely or partially unable to respond to androgens. But because the Barr Body test simply accounts for XX or XY chromosomes, and not the plethora of human variation that complicates this binaristic notion of sex, Martínez-Patiño was disqualified from the 1985 World University Games. She was able to overturn the decision, and shortly after the IAAF dropped the Barr Body test in 1988 followed by the IOC in 1999.

For the 2004 Games in Athens, the IOC adopted its first iteration of guidelines for trans athletes, known as the Stockholm Consensus, stipulating that all trans athletes—both men and women—must have undergone a gonadectomy,¹⁴ changed their gender and/or sex status on government documents, and have been on hormonal therapy to “minimize gender-related advantages in sports competitions.”¹⁵ But the blurring of gendered lines in sports came to a head when Caster Semenya was viciously attacked for her gender nonconformity won her 800-meter race in the 2009 World Championships. Semenya’s opponents spitefully and publicly commented on her masculinity, with one athlete declaring, “For me, [Semenya] is not a woman. She is a man.”¹⁶

¹⁴ A gonadectomy is the surgical removal of the ovaries or testes.

¹⁵ International Olympic Committee, “Stockholm Consensus.”

¹⁶ Levy, “Either/Or.”

Meanwhile, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) flip-flopped with *its* transgender policy, most notably through the case of Kye Allums, the first openly trans Division 1 athlete who played on the women’s basketball team at the George Washington University. An NCAA representative first stipulated in 2010 that Allums must refrain from hormone therapy *and* gender-affirming surgery to retain his eligibility on the women’s basketball team.¹⁷ In 2011, the NCAA released its policy for the “Inclusion of Transgender Student-Athletes,” stating that a transman who is not taking testosterone is still eligible to compete on a women’s team, implying that gender-affirming surgery does not impact eligibility.¹⁸

In 2015, the IOC dropped its surgical requirement for trans athletes and specified that transwomen must maintain their testosterone level below 10 nmol/L of testosterone for at least one year prior to competition. It also amended its policy on trans men to simply, “Those who transition from female to male are eligible to compete in the male category without restriction.”¹⁹ The IAAF (which became World Athletics in 2019) followed a similar trajectory, adding comparable stipulations as the IOC’s 2004 trans policies in 2011, and amending them in 2019 to drop the surgical requirement. The only difference is that World Athletics mandates a level of testosterone in serum below 5 nmol/L for transwomen competing in *all* events, and for intersex women competing only in 400 meters, 800 meters, 1500 meters, and one mile race.

¹⁷ Rand, “Court and Sparkle.”

¹⁸ Griffin and Carroll, Helen, “NCAA Inclusion of Transgender Student-Athletes,” 13.

¹⁹ International Olympic Committee, “IOC Consensus Meeting on Sex Reassignment and Hyperandrogenism November 2015.”

While global and national sports governing bodies added and amended their policies on trans and intersex athletes, in the United Kingdom political conditions for what would colloquially be termed the “TERF wars”²⁰ were fermenting in the wake of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (GRA). Widespread backlash occurred when in 2018 the GRA-reform proposed allowing trans people to self-determine their sex and gender identity markers on all government documents (including their birth certificate). Reform did not occur largely because of UK-based women’s organizations that operationalized a sharp distinction between sex and gender, rendering the former immutable and the latter as a social role or ideological form.²¹ As the editors of a special issue on trans exclusionary feminism argue, this backlash did not occur in a vacuum but rather was “a contextual expression of a wider trans-exclusionary political climate with international dimensions.”²² I contend that an instrumental element of this anti-trans sentiment is opposition to trans athletes, which was made possible by international feminist organizing around issues such as bathrooms bills in the United States and anti-GRA-reform in the UK. In the U.S. anti-trans rhetoric from several women’s organizations and media outlets such as the Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF) and *The Feminist Current* increasingly made the realm of sports a part of their lineup of central issues. As these groups see it, women have a right to be housed in “women-only” shelters, prisons, and to play sports only against ciswomen.

²⁰ TERF stands for Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism. For more on where the term originated, see Smythe, “I’m Credited With Having Coined the Word ‘Terf.’ Here’s How It Happened.”

²¹ Vincent, Erikainen, and Pearce, “TERF Wars: Feminism and the Fight for Transgender Futures.”

²² Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent, “TERF Wars: An Introduction,” 6.

What emerges from this overview is the introduction, refinement, and continuation of surveilling and policing woman's bodies—including their personhood—regardless of whether they are cis or trans. This is apparent, in part, because of who is *not* subject to scrutiny in the debate over trans athletes. I have yet to find a story about a trans guy in men's sports that generates as much cultural anxiety, fear, and panic as *any* story of a trans woman in women's sports. Trans men who take testosterone are eligible to compete “without restriction” according to the IOC. Similarly, the NCAA states that trans men who take testosterone can participate in men's sports but can no longer play on a women's team. The assumption here is that someone assigned female at birth is inherently less athletically competitive—and thus does not pose a threat to the fantasy of fair play equilibrium—than someone assigned male at birth.

A Note on Terms

Before proceeding to a discussion of how sports studies scholars have tried to make sense of the history I have just laid out, I will clarify what I mean when using certain terminology. Throughout this dissertation I use the terms “trans,” “trans woman,” “trans man,” and “transgender.” “Trans” denotes a spaciousness of gender identity and/or expression that otherwise would not justifiably go under the banner of “cisgender,” or when a person's assigned sex aligns with the sex and gender with which they identify. My use of “trans” is in line with, as Jules Gill-Peterson puts it, a “political distinction from medical or pathological meanings that have accrued to the term ‘transgender’ in recent years, many of which have borrowed from the term ‘transsexual,’”²³ I also use “trans phenomena” as the

²³ Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 8.

nounal version of trans. In her introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Susan Stryker describes trans phenomena as calling attention to the fact that “‘gender,’ as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity.”²⁴ “Trans man,” “trans woman,” and “transgender” are used to signal identity or if particular individuals use any of these terms to self-identify.

The acronym “LGBTQ” represents lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. Marquis Bey and Dean Spade have convincingly written about the collapse of the acronym or the LGBTfakeT, respectively, whereby this cluster of letters homogenizes the folks each letter ostensibly represents, thus obscuring institutional and discursive violence specific to trans people, particularly trans people of color.²⁵ In an attempt to limit this obfuscation, I use the acronym specifically in regard to sports organizations, nonprofits, and other entities who use it to describe themselves.

Now to “sports.” It might seem odd to make clear what I mean by sports when, at least conceptually, most people have some sense of what sport *is*. But this is the case for those sports that occupy the center of this conceptual realm, such as basketball, baseball, and football (association and gridiron). In other words, the closer to the margins, the more the definition of sports itself is up for debate. For example, is cheerleading a sport? What about poker or pool? My point is not to decide one way or another, but to queer (more on this term below) or make strange what is commonly perceived to be self-evident about what elements make sport sport.

²⁴ Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” 3.

²⁵ Spade, “Fighting to Win”; Bey, “Trouble Genders.”

Part of what my project seeks to accomplish is to not necessarily settle a categorical debate, as this has been widely covered, but to think through what it is *about* sport that provokes fervent opposition when trans athletes, transwomen in my project's case, are in the mix. But for the sake of having a definitional baseline, I use a definition of sport that is in line with sports studies scholars John W. Low and Jay Coakley's: sport is "an embodied, structured, goal-oriented, competitive, contest-based, ludic, physical activity."²⁶ Ben Carrington's definition is also helpful to emphasize the structural elements in modern sport: sport is "the institutionalized physical practice of internationally, rule-governed competitive games."²⁷

Trans Phenomena and Sports: State of the Fields

In this project, I draw from feminist and queer sports studies, trans studies, and feminist science studies. Scholars on women in sports have produced a vast amount of knowledge, employing feminist theory to critique policy, power/knowledge relations in sport, and international federations that racialize certain gendered bodies when it comes to competing in many high-profile events. Such academic contributions have also discussed trans embodiment through the lens of policy (such as Title IX), medical science, philosophy, and bioethics. Because of this expansive ground, I will summarize contributions to feminist sports studies, the state of sports in queer and trans studies, and how feminist science studies engages with questions about sex and gender in sport specifically in relation to my project.

²⁶ Loy and Coakley, "Sport."

²⁷ Carrington, "Sport and the African Diaspora."

Feminist Sports Studies

Feminist sports studies, grounded in fields such as sociology, history, kinesiology, and media studies, has also engaged with major texts in queer theories to conduct incisive analyses of power relations. One of the first texts to engage with queer theory in relation to sports was Jayne Caudwell's edited collection *Sport, Sexualities, and Queer/Theory*, which addresses issues such as homonormativity in sports, gay and lesbian athletic identities, and homonationalism of major sporting events. Other scholarship employs media and discourse analyses of individual trans athletes such as Renée Richards, a professional tennis player who sued the United States Tennis Association in 1976 because the organization barred her from competing in the Women's Open after she refused to take a Barr body test.²⁸

Homonationalism is written about extensively in other areas of sports studies and brings a queer of color frame to major sporting events such as the Olympics, FIFA, and the Gay Games.²⁹ When the IOC and IAAF adopted guidelines for transgender athletes to participate in 2004 and 2011, respectively, sports scholars have powerfully critiqued these guidelines through queer and decolonial readings of international sports themselves.³⁰ The controversy after Semenya's 2009 race drew academic attention from a range of disciplines that otherwise had not written about sports, particularly for the ways in which race and gender

²⁸ Birrell and Cole, "Double Fault;" Pieper, "Advantage Renée?"

²⁹ Davidson, "Racism against the Abnormal?"; Sykes, "Gay Pride on Stolen Land"; Travers and Shearman, "The Sochi Olympics, Celebration Capitalism, and Homonationalist Pride."

³⁰ Cavanagh and Sykes, "Transsexual Bodies at the Olympics;" Sykes, "Transexual and Transgender Policies in Sport."

intersect in the international arena vis-à-vis post-apartheid nationalism.³¹ Semenya's career also invited academic interest in the histories of sex and gender testing more broadly, particularly when the IOC and IAAF established policies regulating testosterone levels of intersex women in the early 2010s.

Sports in Queer and Trans Studies

Sports has a relatively small existing footprint in queer studies, trans studies' disciplinary relative, perhaps most notably in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*' "The Athletic Issue," edited by Jennifer Doyle. In this special issue, Mary Louise Adams analyzes sports discourses in the early to mid-twentieth century that were used to clinically regulate effeminacy through the DSM.³² Erica Rand's article juxtaposes Kye Allums and Johnny Weir, an effeminate gay figure skater, to trace how sports—from basketball to figure skating—fumbles with genderqueer athletes in a sporting landscape where only two mutually exclusive genders are intelligible. Rand has also written extensively on the racial and gender politics of figure skating, a sport that is notorious for its whiteness and gender normativity.³³ From a cultural studies perspective, little scholarship takes up sport as its primary object of analysis.³⁴

³¹ Nyong'o, "The Unforgivable Transgression of Being Caster Semenya"; Munro, "Caster Semenya"; Hoad, "'Run, Caster Semenya, Run!' Nativism and the Translations of Gender Variance."

³² Adams, "No Taste for Rough-and-Tumble Play."

³³ Rand, "Court and Sparkle." See also, *Red Nails, Black Skates* and *The Small Book of Hip Checks*.

³⁴ There are many instances in which an aspect of sports (typically an athlete) is referenced in order to develop an analysis that is not explicitly a sports-related intervention. This is not a

To be candid, sports remains all but absent as an area of close analysis in the field of transgender studies. For example, a “sport” search in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, the only scholarly journal dedicated solely to transgender studies from a non-clinical perspective,³⁵ renders two entries dedicated solely to sport: the first is Travers’s “sport” keyword entry in *TSQ*’s inaugural double issue and the second is my article about unfair advantage discourse in United States Powerlifting (USAPL). Although this does not *quite* reflect the extent of the trans-sports scholarship, since there is more to trans studies beyond *TSQ* and the journal itself is only seven years old, my cursory example paints a picture of how desperately trans phenomena in sports needs the rich tools of analysis grounded in trans studies. Scholars in trans studies have written about the carceral state, bio- and necropolitics, citizenship and the nation-state, transnational circuits of gender variance, and plenty of other incisive analyses; sport is ripe for epistemological and political picking and well within the purview of trans studies. This dissertation is one entry point to bring sport within the scope of trans studies and seeks to model a closer conversation between feminist sports studies and trans studies, or what I call transfeminist sports studies. Following Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah’s description of transgender studies in their introduction to the inaugural issue of *TSQ*, transfeminist sports studies does not simply take athletic transness as the object of analysis but rather “treats as its archive and object of study the very practices of

critique as much as it is a demonstration that analyses grounded in gender, sexuality, and queer studies hardly *start* with sports as its primary site of inquiry.

³⁵ As Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah note, *TSQ*’s closest but quite distant relative is *The International Journal of Transgender Health*, known before 2020 as *The International Journal of Transgenderism* (Stryker and Currah, “Introduction”)

power/knowledge over gender-variant bodies that construct transgender people as deviant” in sports, athletic practices, and physical culture.³⁶

Indeed, a transfeminist sports studies makes strange—queers—the very practices, systems, and structures, recreational to professional, that pathologize transness in sports.

Sports in Feminist Science Studies

Feminist science studies has focused on the compulsive sex and gender distinction more broadly as well as with a focus on intersex athletes.³⁷ Scholars who have perhaps most forcefully troubled the sex/gender distinction specifically through the lens of intersex variations are Karkazis, Carpenter, Jordan-Young, and Camporesi.³⁸ For example, Katrina Karkazis and her coauthors powerfully rebuke the IAAF’s policy on women athletes with hyperandrogenism, a policy that the IAAF formulated two years after Semenya’s gold medal win in 2009. In “Out of Bounds,” Karkazis et al. advance poignant questions that get to the heart of contemporary debates about testosterone:

To start, does endogenous testosterone actually confer athletic advantage in a predictable way, as the new regulations suggest? If there *is* advantage from naturally occurring variation in testosterone, is that advantage *unfair*? In other words, elite athletes differ from most people in a wide range of ways (e.g., rare genetic mutations that confer extraordinary aerobic capacity and resistance to fatigue).³⁹

³⁶ Stryker and Currah, “Introduction,” 4.

³⁷ For example, see Henne, “The ‘Science’ of Fair Play in Sport”; Pape, “Ignorance and the Gender Binary: Resisting Complex Epistemologies of Sex and Testosterone”; Henne, “Possibilities of Feminist Technoscience Studies of Sport: Beyond Cyborg Bodies;” and Pape, “Expertise and Non-Binary Bodies.”

³⁸ For example, see Karkazis and Carpenter, “Impossible ‘Choices.’”

³⁹ Karkazis et al., “Out of Bounds?,” 2

Their questions interrogate the 2011 IAAF's policy that women with hyperandrogenism must have testosterone levels below 10 nmol/L, which is now 5 nmol/L for transwomen and intersex women competing in specific races. But a comparable amount of pressure and analysis has not been directed at the IAAF's, or the IOC's for that matter, *transgender* policies—which require less than 5 nmol/L of testosterone in serum, along with “written and signed declaration...that her gender identity is female.”⁴⁰ In this dissertation's epilogue, I elaborate on the particularly fruitful dialogue between feminist science and trans studies in the realm of sports.

An Autoethnographic Reflection

In this section I describe how my project came to address trans phenomena in sport, with a particular focus on transwomen, alongside the political backdrop that animates much of the current controversy over trans participation in sports. In doing so, I weave in how my development throughout graduate school helped me make sense of all the athletic gender trouble I encountered since I started playing tennis at seven years old. My point here is to demonstrate how my project came to be as a result of my personal experience as an elite athlete in an epistemological pursuit of the politics of gender policing in sport.

I originally envisioned this dissertation as focusing on LGBT issues in sports. More specifically, I was interested in how organizations such as Athlete Ally and the You Can Play Project worked to, as Athlete Ally puts it, “create LGBTQI+ inclusive athletic

⁴⁰ World Athletics, “Eligibility Regulations for Transgender Athletes.”

environments.”⁴¹ As a genderqueer masculine jock myself, I had completed the first year of my master’s program in 2011, which was when Athlete Ally was founded, and was interested in the conditions that enabled the possibility of LGBT sports advocacy groups to exist in the first place. During that first year of coursework at SUNY Buffalo, I had read queer and feminist theory for the first time (I was a history major and had never taken gender studies courses as an undergrad) and learned about the limitations of liberal rights-based frameworks of social justice. Simply put, it seemed to me that the queer critiques of homonormative organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) I read applied to the “athletic versions of HRC,” as I call them, that were popping up in the early 2010s. But I couldn’t quite put my finger on why this particular athletic flavor of equality and inclusion rhetoric seemed to have more pronounced sexist undertones. For example, why was it earth shattering when a cisman in professional sports came out as gay but business-as-usual when a professional woman athlete revealed that she is lesbian? By no means was I interested in proportionate attention paid to lesbian athletes’ coming out, as I had also become versed in queer critiques of “coming out,” but at the same time I wondered what we might learn from such snubbing of women athletes.

The shift in scope of my dissertation from LGBTQ issues in sports to the politics of transness in sport, specifically from the perspective of transwomen, also stems from my personal experience in sports in conjunction with an intellectual epiphany during one of my interviews. I’ll start with my background first. Tennis was the primary sport that I played from the age of seven until I was twenty-three. I started as a walk-on (without a scholarship) on a Division 1 women’s tennis team and earned a full scholarship during my sophomore

⁴¹ Athlete Ally, “About.”

year. That same year I came out to my teammates and eventually my two coaches a few months later. My teammates were graciously unsurprised, and my head coach's response was, "Okay, just don't date your teammates." My sexuality—no problem—but as my gender expression became more masculine, I seemed to be more out-of-place, particularly in a traditionally hyper-feminine sport such as tennis. I half-jokingly told my head coach that I wanted to cut my hair short, and his response was effectively, "don't do it because it will hurt your endorsement chances" (it was my junior year, I had been playing professional tournaments, and I was considering turning pro after I graduated). His response wasn't surprising, but what I did find odd was his over-compensating follow-up: "this has nothing to do with you being gay!" It was as if he did not want his stance on my haircut to come across as homophobic, while the gender-phobia was left unaccounted for. A few years later at one of my first days on the job as the assistant men's and women's tennis coach at a different Division 1 college, I told the head track coach that I played tennis in college to which he responded, "I can't imagine *you* in a skirt." Later in the year our men's team played West Point. During their pre-match chant our men's team yelled "Rape on three!" to communicate that they were set on defeating the West Point men, paragons of masculinity. Our head coach, my boss, noticed my irate facial expression, and to ease the tension, he jokingly said to the men in our team huddle, "don't yell rape again or CJ will slice your balls off." I read this as, "don't intimate sexual violence to anybody again or CJ—our woman-but-very-masculine assistant coach—will castrate you." Masculine domination will be punished by masculine domination, a punishment made more severe because the castrater has a vagina. The list of moments like these goes on, especially as I got more butch, and delved into other sports like co-ed softball, wrestling, and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. But what was clear to me was that in sports,

being gay is one thing, expressing oneself in a gender nonconforming manner is quite another. Of course, gender and sexuality are *always* entangled with one another, especially when the assumption is that the former determines or communicates the latter.

Now to the turning point. In August 2019 I interviewed Jaycee Cooper, a powerlifter from Minnesota, and was interested to hear her perspective on why USA Powerlifting (USAPL) had recently banned trans powerlifters, starting with her, from competing in its federation. She mentioned that the recorded presentation on the “facts” behind USAPL’s policy was problematic at best. Curious, I watched the two-hour presentation on YouTube and did a close reading of the pseudo-scientific claims, perplexing analogies, and nonsensical case studies. After writing what amounted to a dissertation chapter, I realized that I had barely scratched the surface of a plethora of anti-trans-in-sports sentiment seeping from other athletic federations as well as feminist organizations, conservative think tanks, otherwise pro-trans constituents, and even trans athletes themselves. As a result, I decided to focus on gender politics in sports by specifically examining trans women athletes.

Methods

I utilize a mixed-methods approach that draws from humanities and social sciences. I analyze cultural representations of trans* athletes in news outlets and social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter; discourses of trans-exclusionary feminist groups on formal organization websites as well as web-building platforms such as WordPress; and the official rules and regulations of athletic federations such as USAPL, IOC, and World Athletics. I also formulate what amounts to a hybrid between participant-observation and autoethnographic data from engaging in athletic practices ranging from wrestling, Brazilian

jiu-jitsu, tennis, and slow pitch softball. I interviewed eleven trans women athletes and I contacted them through four avenues. The first is through the annual OutSports Pride, which was held in Los Angeles in June 2019. The weekend-long event consisted of a “meet-up” at a bar in West Hollywood; a one-day symposium at the University of California, Los Angeles; a rooftop party at a hotel in West Hollywood; a “field day” at Dodger Stadium that included lawn games and a tour; and an OutSports cohort marching in the Los Angeles Pride Parade. I had followed and written about OutSports and attended the weekend events in order to stay current on LGBTQ sports-related issues. I also saw it as an opportunity to meet potential interviewees. Throughout the weekend I chatted with and exchanged contact information with four transwomen athletes and ultimately interviewed three of them.

The second is through the OutSports platform itself, an online news outlet that publishes articles relating to LGBTQ issues in sport primarily in the United States. Several articles chronicle transgender athletes, some that are high-profile such as Chris Mosier and Veronica Ivy, and others who play high school, college, or recreational sports. The third approach was through a Wikipedia search of “transgender people in sport.” The page includes a list of “Notable Transgender Athletes,” divided into transmen and transwomen. From this page, I compiled a list of potential contacts. The remaining women on the list had either died, had transitioned after their sports career, or were athletes whom I categorized as “too famous.”⁴² The fourth avenue that I pursued was a list of women created by

⁴² The person that I put in the “too famous” category is Renée Richards, a former tennis player professional tennis player who sued the United States Tennis Association in 1977 because they would not let her compete in the women’s U.S. Open. She’s considered to be the first openly trans athlete to compete. Her story is well-documented by journalists and scholars: she has two autobiographies, an *ESPN* documentary, and the focus of several academic articles.

SaveWomensSports.com. The alphabetical list is titled, “Males Competing in Female Sports” and includes sixty-six women, the sports that they play, and links to online news articles about the athletes.⁴³ The athletes on these three websites overlapped but I compiled a list of twenty-one. I messaged each person through Facebook or Instagram, briefly explained my research, and asked if I could interview them for my dissertation. Using these three websites, I found and contacted fourteen people and interviewed the eight that responded. In total, I interviewed eleven women over the telephone in a semi-structured format, lasting between forty-five minutes to two hours. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

The degree of involvement in my interviewees’ respective sport also ranges widely: one cyclist has multiple trainers and sponsors; another woman competed in international dodgeball for several years before moving on to focus on her career in acting; a slowpitch softball player travels around the United States for tournaments; and another woman had been taking Brazilian Jiu Jitsu classes three to four times per week for three years at the time of our interview. Most of my interviewees do not make money competing and all of them have a full-time job. Some have a degree of sponsorship, whether occasional or official. For example, an associate in Jamie’s softball network will occasionally pay for the flights and hotel rooms of her whole team—comprised of skilled softball players—in order for them to win national tournaments. Veronica has a company sponsorship that supplies some of her cycling equipment.

Out of the eleven athletes, four identify as transwoman, five identify as female, one identifies as transfeminine/nonbinary, and one identifies as female/woman. They are between the ages of twenty-three and forty-seven, with two in their twenties, six women in their

⁴³ Save Women’s Sports, “Males in Female Sports.”

thirties, and three in their forties. Ten of my interviewees are white and one identifies as Pacific Islander. Two of my interviewees are Canadian, one is a New Zealander, one is Native Hawaiian, and seven are from the United States. The disparity in my interviewees' racial demographic presents a limitation to this data and the eleven women I interviewed by no means represent the range of transwomen athletes. How certain transwomen are racialized while the whiteness of others goes unmarked is tended to in other forms of evidence that I examine in chapters 2 and 3.

By interviewing transwomen athletes, I wanted to gain insight into how they navigate being trans in their sport's world from minute to general ways. Considering Clare Hemming's analysis of the stories that feminism tells about itself in relation to her own analysis of interviews, Carly Thomsen states that the "politics of the present shape our subjectivities as story-tellers and inform the stories that we tell—both my interviewees' telling and my telling of their telling."⁴⁴ Similarly, the questions I asked and my re-telling of their responses is informed by broader trans politics of the current moment.

Chapter Outline

In chapter 2 I give an overview of the feminist groups that are publicly vocal about their opposition to transwomen and girls playing sports. While more scholarly attention is increasingly paid to the feminist groups, hardly any has focused on the issue of sports in these groups' agenda. Arguments that run across their rhetoric are that trans women take away Title IX resources; trans women threaten cis women's safety in sports. Both arguments

⁴⁴ Thomsen, "Unbecoming," 54.

are advanced through an infantilized figure—whether it is the child or the woman—that is cisgender and white.

In chapter 3, I analyze a presentation that USAPL gave in which they outline the scientific evidence behind that ban against transgender powerlifters. Using the concept of “T talk,” I argue that justification behind this ban is laden with pseudoscience that leverages myths about testosterone to pathologize trans athletes.

In chapter 4, I draw on my interviews with eleven transwomen athletes to tell their stories for two reasons. First, countless news articles and academic scholarship talk *about* transwomen in sports, many of which scrutinize bodily systems (i.e. endocrinology, testosterone levels) of a specific demographic (transwomen) in distanced and medicalized language. This manner of depicting trans life—body features without bodies—can have an unintended effect of dehumanizing trans people, reducing our ontology to a hormone or a facial feature. The second reason is to shed light on many of the effects of hormone treatment therapy that complicate the “unfair advantage” argument against these athletes. In addition, I analyze what I found to be unexpected reasons why they continue to train and compete in their sport despite increasing hostility in public discourse.

Chapter 2: Gender Critical Feminism Goes to Bat

In June 2019, *OutSports* profiled one athlete every day of the month in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots. Dubbed as having “Stonewall spirit,” these athletes include Greg Louganis, gay Olympic diver; Chris Mosier, a trans hall-of-fame triathlete and six-time Team USA member; Tom Wadell, a track and field Olympian and founder of the Gay Olympics, later renamed the Gay Games; and Renée Richards, trans tennis player in the 1970s who sued the United States Tennis Association in 1976 for prohibiting her from playing in the U.S. Open Women’s draw. Coinciding with *OutSports*’ daily commemoration was their annual *OutSports* Pride celebration that included many trans athletes sharing their experience in a variety of sports, as noted in prelude II.

That is why it was startling when Martina Navratilova was profiled on June 10—one day after the conclusion of the *OutSports* pride summit—and named as an athlete with “Stonewall spirit.” In December 2018, six months before, Navratilova tweeted that “you can’t just proclaim yourself a female and be able to compete against women.”¹ In February of the following year, Navratilova published an op-ed in *The Sunday Times* where she reflects on the backlash that she received following her December tweet and how she would stay silent on the subject until she had “properly researched it.”² Having done her research, Navratilova declared that her views have “strengthened” and they are clear:

To put the argument at its most basic: a man can decide to be female, take hormones if required by whatever sporting organisation is concerned, win everything in sight and perhaps earn a small fortune, and then reverse his decision and go back to making babies if he so desires. It's insane and it's

¹ Ennis, “Martina Navratilova Is an Athlete with ‘Stonewall Spirit.’”

² Navratilova, “The Rules on Trans Athletes Reward Cheats and Punish the Innocent.”

cheating. I am happy to address a transgender woman in whatever form she prefers, but I would not be happy to compete against her. It would not be fair.”

Navratilova then expressed a familiar concern, one that is common among folks who hold trans-exclusionary views, that there is a “tendency among transgender activists to denounce anyone who argues against them and to label them all as ‘transphobes.’” She worries that such “tyranny” may suppress those with contrary views into “silence” or “submission.”

OutSports was founded in 1999 on the belief that gay, lesbian, and bisexual athletes should be able to openly play their sport without fear of backlash. Navratilova, who came out in 1981, is a significant figure in *OutSports*’ mission because she symbolizes that an athlete can be openly gay and excel in her sport. Navratilova’s tweet demonstrates tensions evident in the relationship between trans politics and lesbian, gay, and bisexual politics in sports. The first is the position that generally supports trans people except when it comes to their participation in sport. More specifically, it is a position that opposes trans women playing women’s sports but is otherwise supportive of their trans identity. The second and related underlying point that undergirds all three preludes is that sports constitute the “obvious” example that proves trans women are not “real women.” It is so obvious as to be an almost universal source of common sense: even Martina Navratilova—a sports expert because of her illustrious tennis career—says trans women playing with/against cis women is unfair. As a lesbian, she is part of the “LGBT” acronym and accepts transgender people—even “happy to address a transgender woman in whatever form she prefers”—except when it comes to playing women’s sports. Navratilova draws this proverbial line through the patronizing tone that undergirds her ostensible tolerance of transwomen outside of sports.

Conservative organizations have leveraged Navratilova’s public comments against legislative protections for transgender people. For example, on February 22, 2019 the house

judiciary committee for the Montana state legislature convened to vote on a number of house bills. House Bill 465 would revise Montana’s discrimination laws by adding gender identity or expression and sexual orientation to its list of protected classes of persons. In effect, the law would prohibit discrimination in employment, housing, education, and goods and services provided by the state. For the purposes of the bill, gender identity is defined as “gender-related identity, appearance, expression, or behavior of an individual, regardless of the individual's assigned sex at birth” and sexual orientation as “an individual's actual or perceived romantic or sexual attraction to people of the same or different gender.”³

During the forty-five-minute period where opponents of the bill made their case against HB 465, Anita Milanovich, an attorney for the Montana Family Foundation, argued that the proposed bill threatens “three key areas of American life.” First, it threatens first amendment protections, namely freedom of speech, religion, and conscience, for Montanans. Second, it would put the privacy and safety of Montanans at risk by “inviting men” into locker rooms, changing rooms, and bathrooms with women and girls. It would also allow “men identifying as women” to sleep alongside women staying at domestic violence shelters. Third, it would threaten the economic safety of Montanans because it would allow the government to regulate ideas and beliefs rather than free exchange of them.

Tucked in the rationale of her second point, where the proposed bill would threaten the safety of women and girls, Milanovich noted that the academic and athletic achievements of women and girls would be

eviscerated, as men who profess a female identity will take spots on female teams and compete for scholarships and opportunities designated for women. Tennis legend Martina Navratilova recently raised this issue in an op-ed

³ Montana Legislature, House, *Generally revise the Montana human rights act*. MT HB465, 2019 Regular Session, died on April 25, 2019.

stating that a rule that allows trans athletes to compete according to their gender ‘rewards cheats and punishes the innocent.’ She was removed from the LGBTQ board for being transphobic.⁴

The bill died in April 2019. When an attorney at ACLU’s Montana branch tweeted that Navratilova’s words were “used to oppose inclusion of LGBTQ people in Montana’s human rights act,”⁵ Navratilova responded in a tweet, “well that is just ridiculous—I was only speaking about professional athletic competitions—certainly not HUMAN RIGHTS and EQUAL rights for transgender people. That is totally misrepresenting what I said.”⁶

A snapshot of this Montana bill hearing offers insight into the innumerable anti-trans and gender essentialist legislation that states have introduced since 2019. Almost all these bills implicate sports, whether implicitly or explicitly, and thereby prevent people who were assigned male at birth and who identify as girls/women from competing in girls’/women’s sports. What interests me in the case of the Montana bill, however, is how a prominent—arguably legendary—sports figure is evoked in what is otherwise a non-sports-related bill. Why is a bill that would merely add gender identity to an existing law opposed by way of citing a famous tennis player? Although Navratilova had been vocal about her opposition to trans women in sports and therefore is not a particularly random choice, I am drawn to how sport becomes the focal point to which lawmakers, gender critical groups, and even “ordinary” people turn to as the “obvious” arena to prove once and for all the immutable differences between men and women.

⁴ *House Hearing on HB 465*

⁵ SK Rossi (@S_K_Rossi)

⁶ Martina Navratilova (@Martina), Twitter, February 22, 2019, 2:58 p.m.

Gender Critical Feminism

Viv Smythe, an Australian feminist blogger, first used “gender critical” on her internet blog “Finally, A Feminism 101 Blog” in 2008 as a term to describe how feminists who are opposed to trans phenomena and identities articulate their position through a critique of what they call gender ideology.⁷ “Gender critical” indicates less of a critical approach to gender and more of a firm grounding biological determinism. Growing support for trans identities, LGBT-inclusive education in schools, and mainstream visibility of trans people particularly in popular culture is a result of what gender critical feminists have called “gender ideology.”⁸ Gender ideology is premised on the belief that trans people “feel” like they identify with a gender other than what they were assigned at birth. According to this logic, sex assigned at birth is immutable and permanent regardless of a person’s gender identification. As such, any form of gender transgression is considered anywhere from silly to a product of male violence against women (usually rape), depending on the strain of gender critical feminism.

Anti-trans women feminists prefer the term “gender critical” instead of “TERF,” which is shorthand for “Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist.” They view the term TERF as a slur that silences their position. I choose to use “gender critical feminism,” what I will hereafter call GCF, instead of TERF or other terms for a two reasons.⁹ First, TERF risks homogenizing radical feminism in a way that erases histories of radical feminism’s trans-

⁷ tigtog, “An Apology and a Promise”; Williams, “Sex, Gender, and Sexuality.”

⁸ Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent, “TERF Wars.”4 (July 2020): 677–98.

⁹ Similarly, “GCFs” stands for “gender critical feminists.”

inclusive and anti-racist politics.¹⁰ And as Finn Enke argues, history is important “not because things were better (or worse) in an earlier time but because, as cocreators of collective memory, we’re all doing it one way and another, and it matters how we tell the story.”¹¹ Secondly, gender critical feminism cites a particular anti-trans politics—or what Jules Gill-Peterson suggests is a “highly contemporary form of anti-trans backlash that has taken the convergence of trans visibility and vulnerability as an opportunity.”¹² While GCF is *ideologically* similar to anti-trans discourses that some radical feminists supported and disseminated in the 1970s, the political and cultural *conditions* that shape and promulgate their prevalence are different. The convergence between trans visibility and vulnerability marks the hollowness of what is now commonly known as the “transgender tipping point,” a term made famous by Laverne Cox’s appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine in May 2014. Thus, GCF is shaped by the same historical, political, and social conditions that make the concept of a transgender tipping point possible. This is not to deny that current anti-trans discourse in GCF groups is congruent with a particular strain of radical feminism—in fact many label themselves as such—but to distinguish how the radical feminist bent of GCF groups is shaped by contemporary social and political conditions.

GCFs have staked their position against several issues that range from state and federal legislation that protect gender identity to legal battles over workplace discrimination to objection to drag. Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF) is “a radical feminist organization dedicated to the total liberation of women. We fight to end male violence, regain

¹⁰ Heaney, “Women-Identified Women.”

¹¹ Enke, “Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s.”

¹² Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 196.

reproductive sovereignty, and ultimately dismantle the gender-caste system.” WoLF is one of the more structured well-resourced organizations that is aligned with GCF. The backbone of their organization is their annually elected board of directors and four task forces dedicated to “political action for women’s liberation:” women’s reproductive autonomy; “pornstitution”¹³; gender abolition¹⁴; and male violence. The group has sent formal statements in several legal battles as well as in struggles over state and federal legislation regarding gender identity. These include an amicus brief to the Supreme Court in *R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC and Aimee Stephens*; board member testimony in favor of South Dakota HB 1057, a bill that would have prohibited doctors from providing gender affirming healthcare such as surgeries, hormone therapy, and puberty blockers; and a letter to the board of directors of Hennepin County Public Library that outlines WoLF’s objection to Drag Queen Story Hour because it promotes homophobia, sexism, and an “unhealthy image” of LGBT people.¹⁵ As I show in the next section, WoLF has also been involved in opposition to trans women athletes.

Other avenues of support and idea-exchange among GCFs include blogs and sites that re-post news articles either written by GCFs or published on a GCF website. For example, “The Politics of Gender” provides background information on GCF’s stance on gender and

¹³ WoLF seeks to abolish prostitution and pornography, which it views as forms of violence against women. In addition, WoLF supports the Nordic model of prostitution that criminalizes buyers of sexual services and decriminalizes sex work.

¹⁴ WoLF’s gender abolition task force “seeks to abolish the gender-caste system; educates about the harms of gender and its centrality to male domination; vigorously defends women-only spaces; defends sex-segregation of domestic violence shelters, bathrooms, locker rooms, and sports teams; and supports detransitioners in their struggle to be healed and heard.”

¹⁵ WoLF, “Feminist Objections to Drag Queen Story Hour.”

sex;¹⁶ “Transcritical” re-posts over 400 online articles that critique “transgender doctrine;”¹⁷ “Sex Not Gender,” founded by a feminist lawyer, posts legal takes on gender identity policies;¹⁸ “Gender Critical Greens” is a collective of feminists that oppose gender ideology and seek to realign feminism within green politics;¹⁹ and “4th Wave Now,” created by a left-leaning mother of a teenager who came out as a transman, challenges a medical “rush” to diagnose and help children, teens, and folks in their early 20s to transition.²⁰ One of the larger producers of articles, commentary, and other online content is *The Feminist Current*, which was founded by Meghan Murphy in 2012. Based in Vancouver, the website publishes content that critiques third wave feminism, gender identity politics, and the “sex industry through a socialist position.”²¹ In their most basic iteration, these sites maintain the position that anyone assigned male at birth is unequivocally male, and therefore a man, regardless of gender identification. From this assertion, various GCF sites disseminate the argument that trans women do not belong in women-only spaces such as homeless shelters, women’s bathrooms, locker rooms, and other gender-segregated spaces. If trans women seek access to these spaces, GCFs claim that cisgender women’s right to privacy and physical safety are violated.

¹⁶ “The Politics of Gender.”

¹⁷ “Critiquing Transgender Doctrine & Gender Identity Politics.”

¹⁸ “Sex Matters.”

¹⁹ “Gender Critical Greens – Gender Hurts.”

²⁰ 4thWaveNow, “About.”

²¹ Feminist Current, “About.”

While these feminist groups are significantly involved in anti-trans measures in sports, other groups have formed that specifically oppose trans women in women's sports. Save Women's Sports (SWS) was founded by amateur powerlifter Beth Stelzer in 2019 and is a non-partisan "coalition that seeks to preserve biology-based eligibility standards for participation in female sports."²² Stelzer started SWS after USAPL banned JayCee Cooper and other trans powerlifters from competing in USAPL-sanctioned events, which subsequently led to a "time out" protest by Cooper, trans allies, and other trans powerlifters who opposed the ban.²³

Compared to GCF sites geared toward consciousness-raising, SWS offers multiple opportunities to get involved in the movement against trans women in sports while also allowing the viewer to "review the science" and read up on the latest news articles. This action-oriented bent permeates almost every location on the website. On its home page, three links provide just this: sandwiched between a link to review the science and read the "newest articles," the viewer's gaze centers on the middle tab, titled "Save Women's Sports," with a link to "write letters, make calls, and sign petitions." Shortly after Governor Little of Idaho signed HB 500, which stipulates sex and gender as that which is assigned at birth, the SWS

²² Save Women's Sports, "About."

²³ Stelzer describes the scene of the protest at this particular competition: "Fourteen of [the 82 women who] supported Cooper by 'timing out' at the bar — standing in silence on the platform instead of lifting — while protesters gathered around them, clapped, and chanted, 'Share the platform,' during the full minute lifters are allotted to attempt the lift. In powerlifting we perform three lifts: the squat, bench, and deadlift. At competitions, we get three chances to attempt each lift. The best of each lift creates your lift total and is entered into a formula that considers age, weight, and sex to determine the winner. This gave the activists nine opportunities to protest, which most took full advantage of, and resulted in well over 90 minutes of disruptions. With two platforms of competitors lifting at the same time, the disturbance carried on regardless of whose turn it was. The unsportsmanlike behaviour ruined the event" (Stelzer, "Why I'm Fighting to Save Women's Sport").

homepage summoned its viewers in giant black and white letters to “Call Gov. Brad Little at 208-334-2100 and thank him for signing HB 500!” Alongside the “Home” and “About Us” tabs at the top of the page, the viewer can click on “Males in Women’s Sport,” which leads to four sub-tabs. The first sub-tab, titled, “Males Playing as Females,” gives an alphabetical list of 59 trans women athletes followed by an alphabetized list of sports that these women play. Under each sport the viewer sees a photo of the athlete along with a caption that deadnames and/or misgenders them. In my interview with cyclist Veronica Ivy, who is well known for her athletic achievements and trans sports activist work, she pointed out that sites such as SWS tend to use the most “unflattering” photos of athletes in order to emphasize a lack of femininity, a move that visually makes the argument that someone who “looks” like a man should not play women’s sports.²⁴ The “Image Gallery” and “Science” sub-tabs contain a multitude of infographics of skeletal and muscular comparisons between male and female anatomy.

Another anti-trans campaign is Fair Play for Women (FPW), based in the UK and founded in 2018 by Dr. Nicola Williams. The campaign started as an informal blogging site exclusively to discuss effects of trans policies on women and girls in sports, particularly regarding the Gender Recognition Act that allows trans people to acquire documentation that legally recognizes their sex and gender identity. Extending beyond an awareness campaign, FPW now is composed of “experts in science and law” whom policy-makers can consult in order to provide “expert legal and scientific input to help make good policy which maintains fairness and safety for women and girls.”²⁵ Whereas SWS is a grassroots and volunteer-based

²⁴ Ivy, Interview by Author, Telephone, May 19, 2019.

²⁵ Fair Play for Women, “Our Aim.”

organization that spreads awareness through publicizing individual women's and girls' experience, FPW takes more of a structural approach that seeks to amend and institute policies that exclude trans girls and trans women from sport.

Frenemies: GCF and Conservative Affiliation

Conservative affiliations with these GCF organizations and campaigns range from what Nancy Whittier calls overt and substantial to none or oppositional.²⁶ Whittier's framework for analyzing the extent of religious and secular conservative affiliations with feminist groups is useful because it maps the historical and strategic trajectories of women's social movements alongside and in tandem with conservatism. Although feminist and conservative groups are generally opposed to each other, their interaction stems from shared opposition to pornography, child sexual abuse, and violence against women that dates back to the 1970s. These feminist-conservative frenemy interactions have arguably laid the groundwork for today's right-wing Christian and secular conservative anti-trans "adversarial collaboration" with radical feminist organizations.²⁷ Whittier defines a collaborative adversarial relationship as a type of frenemy relationship where organizations within different social movements share opposition to the same issue, albeit for different reasons. For religious conservatives, the immutability of sex must be defended in order to protect moral society (composed of nuclear families) from becoming a sexually deviant and

²⁶ Whittier, "Rethinking Coalitions: Anti-Pornography Feminists, Conservatives, and Relationships between Collaborative Adversarial Movements."

²⁷ Whittier, *Frenemies: Feminists, Conservatives, and Sexual Violence*.

generally hedonistic one. Radical feminist organizations such as WoLF insist on the immutability of “biological” sex (sex assigned at birth) in order to protect cis women as a legally and culturally protected class, and thereby establish and maintain (cis)women-only spaces such as prisons, homeless and domestic violence shelters, bathrooms, and girls/women’s only sports teams.

Anti-trans organizations, which include GCF and conservative constituents, coalesced against the introduction of the Equality Act in March 2019. The bill would amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Fair Housing Act, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, the Jury Selection and Services Act, and other laws pertaining to employment in order to explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity. Before the bill would pass in the House of Representatives on May 17, 2019, a conglomerate of leaders from women’s groups co-signed a letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi urging “Congress to pass laws that protect and defend the rights and dignity of women and the gains we have made, not laws that risk our safety and our opportunities.”²⁸ The letter was signed by several directors of chapters of Concerned Women for America along with WoLF board member Kara Dansky and Save Women’s Sports founder Beth Stelzer. It is signed by these women’s groups along with conservative organizations such as Alliance Defending Freedom and Family Research Council. This alignment—which includes Save Women’s Sports—explicitly delineates its stance regarding gender identity and how the bill would be detrimental to women’s sports.

The letter defines gender identity as having “no objective standard, medical diagnosis, or permanent intent” and that it is “nothing more than a person’s perception of self that can be changed at any time, for any reason, and cannot be challenged.” The Equality Act

²⁸ Women Coalition, “Equality Act Women Coalition Letter,” May 14, 2019.

would therefore “abolish the protections of biological sex-specific practices and spaces.” The co-signors thus refuse to give up their right to “women-only” sports: “Puberty, testosterone, and innate biological differences give physical advantages to males that cannot be mitigated, disqualifying any female athlete from fair competition. To deny this is denying science.”

One of the co-signers of the letter, Hands Across the Aisle Coalition (HATAC), takes what Whittier calls a “narrow neutral” approach to frenemy interaction. In a collaboration strategy that is less adversarial on the surface, a narrow neutral approach unites otherwise opposing organizations on a single issue—in this case trans-inclusive policies—and frames it as a politically neutral issue. As their website states, “We are radical feminists, lesbians, Christians and conservatives that are tabling our ideological differences to stand in solidarity against gender identity legislation...we are committed to working together, rising above our differences, and leveraging our collective resources to oppose gender identity ideology.”²⁹

Some GCFs, however, are critical of collaboration with conservative organizations. For example, Elizabeth Hungerford, creator of Sex Not Gender, opposes WoLF’s alignment with conservative groups, particularly when it comes to legal matters. In a blog post titled, “Bad Things and Very Bad Things: Feminists Working with the Religious Right,” she states that WoLF’s relationship with Family Policy Alliance and Alliance Defending Freedom, two religious conservative organizations, has resulted in “leveraging slippery slope arguments and scare tactics to control the uninformed.”³⁰ Faulty legal arguments—informed by religious conservatives—combined with “alarmist prophecies... [are] very obviously a Very Bad Thing if you’re trying to win hearts and minds and promote female solidarity.”

²⁹ Hands Across the Aisle, “Who We Are.”

³⁰ Hungerford, “Bad Things and Very Bad Things.”

The frenemy relationship between GCFs and conservatives, whether narrowly neutral or adversely collaborative, has fostered a wider range of opposition to transgender policies and legal rulings. Informed by otherwise differing ideological positions, they share a belief that trans girls and trans women pose a threat to their biologically determinist understanding of the category of woman. Their opposition to transfeminine identities is expressed through various issues that impact transgender people, namely access to hormones and surgery, gender-segregated bathrooms, and sports. It is these latter two issues where opposition is most explicitly directed against trans girls and trans women because of their alleged threat to the physical safety and level playing field that ostensibly already exist for cisgender women and girls in these realms. GCFs and conservatives harness the social and political momentum that developed during controversy over bathrooms in order to eliminate trans girls and trans women from competing in women's sports. In the next section, I explore in more detail the terrain upon which GCFs build their opposition to transfeminine people in women's sports.

Attack on Gender Theory

In a letter of support to Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and Assistant Secretary of Education for Civil Rights Kenneth Marcus, WoLF urges the Department to uphold Title IX's intent, which is to "remedy centuries of sex-based discrimination against women and girls in the educational arena, including athletics."³¹ In another letter on behalf of the Connecticut high school girls in their Title IX complaint, WoLF delineates the difference between sex and gender:

³¹ WoLF, "Title IX Discrimination Complaint on Behalf of Minor Children Selina Soule, [Second Complainant], and [Third Complainant]," June 28, 2019.

The word “sex” refers to the material and objectively-verifiable distinction between male and female. Sex is recorded (not “assigned”) at birth by qualified medical professionals, and it is an exceedingly accurate categorization: an infant’s sex is easily identifiable based on external genitalia and other factors in 99.982% of all cases... In stark contrast to sex, “gender” and “gender identity” refer to stereotypical roles, personalities, behavioral traits, and clothing fashions that are culturally associated with men and women, respectively. There is no credible support for the argument that “gender identity” is innate or has any biological basis, or that every human being has a “gender identity.” “Gender identity” is simply a belief system that seeks to categorize people not by sex but by the degree to which they conform or identify with sex-stereotypes.

The letter provides a clear division between sex and gender, where the former is the “easily identifiable” materiality of the body and the latter is a purely social or cultural set of norms.

WoLF expounds upon gender identity’s flimsy basis when compared to the science of sex:

The entire concept of “gender identity” is rooted in the notion that males and females have particular sex-specific ways of feeling and thinking, but scientists have demonstrated time and again that male and female brains produce a rich and mostly overlapping mosaic of personality characteristics, skills, and intelligence. This science demonstrates that gender is not innate. It is a collection of sex-based stereotypes that society imposes on people on the basis of sex, where women are understood to like particular clothing and hair styles and to have nurturing, unassuming personalities, whereas men are said to like a different set of styles and to have ambitious, outgoing personalities. This is simply old-fashioned sexism. The idea that women and girls have an innate connection to the sex-based stereotypes that are imposed on them is insulting, and contrary to the well-established principle affirmed by the Supreme Court.

For WoLF, trans people like Andraya Yearwood and Terry Miller merely identify with “sex-based stereotypes.” On SWS, one author states that “changing costume does not change gender roles of women” and that even though “gender is predominantly performative, there are some genetic consistencies where women are concerned.”³² According to this logic,

³² Kendall, “Save Women.”

gender is largely performative while genetics are not, they are simply factual. Sex is innate and immutable whereas gender is not; gender is based on social stereotypes. Yet, for GCFs, gender is *determined* by sex and is therefore also immutable. This forms the basis of their argument that one cannot simply change one's gender.

Gender performativity stems from feminist theories of sex and gender, notably by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990. Feminists both inside and out of academic circles misunderstand the concept of gender performativity as simply a performance, a series of costume adjustments. While some feminists believe in gender performativity, albeit a flawed understanding of it, constructionism does not cover sex. In other words, binary gender may be a societal and cultural artifact, but dimorphic sex is not.

Temporality of Gender Critical Feminist Discourse About Trans Women in Sports

The adamant separation between sex and gender for GCFs coincides with a corresponding temporal division. The logic that frames the present crisis for cisgender women, especially cisgender women and girls in sports, is a temporal one, or what Clare Hemmings calls the “temporality of gender discourse.”³³ It is a narrative mechanism that affixes a characterization of feminism to a particular time. In *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Hemmings tracks the repetition of progress, loss, and return narratives that mobilize virtually the same feminist stories to characterize a past and differentiate it from the present in order to secure a particular kind of future. Hemmings's framework is useful here because GCF groups deploy narratives that follow a similar pattern

³³ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, 11.

in order to recruit support for a future that ultimately protects cisgender girls' and women's access to sport at the expense of those who are trans. These groups specifically deploy loss and return narratives that celebrate feminist advances in the 1960s and 1970s—often represented through title IX in 1972—but fear these advances are jeopardized by feminists who support “gender ideology” and ignore the materiality of the body in the name of trans inclusion. Thus, the solution for the future—represented through the 1970s feminism's inner child—is to return to a “woman-identified-woman” era so that girls sports will not become what they often call “co ed sports.”

As a woman, as a mother, and as a girl who grew up during the sexual revolution, I know I'm not alone in my concerns on this issue. An entire new generation of young girls are waiting and watching. Are we going to stand up for them and protect their opportunities to fairly compete and to earn scholarships, or will we shrink back and allow our collective voices to be silenced by an outrage mob?

Here, the sexual revolution signals a time period where many women and mothers of the “new generation” mobilized against traditional gender codes and sex roles. When juxtaposed with the “young girls [who] are waiting and watching,” the author implies that progress made during the sexual revolution is at risk of being undone. The author evokes an era that is retroactively commemorated as a cohesive “collective” that brought about many indispensable feminist advances. Today, the author depicts trans people and allies as merely an “outrage mob” who pale in comparison.

Nancy Barto, sponsor of the Save Women's Sports Act in Arizona, characterizes the current state of women and girls' sports through what Congress “knew nearly 50 years ago”:

Opponents continue to ignore the elephant in the room—the innate biological differences between the sexes - and instead are ginning up the political rhetoric with name-calling as if the bill is anti-trans or LGBT—but that is simply not the case. Even many trans individuals and liberal feminists agree

that a level playing field for women's sports must be preserved to ensure the future of Title IX and women's athletic and educational opportunities. It preserves privacy and it preserves sports opportunities for everyone—in the appropriate sex classifications. Congress knew nearly 50-years ago that men and women are different, and if women were going to have a chance at the equal opportunity in sports and education they deserved, Congress would have to make some distinctions. That's why they passed Title IX. This bill is about fairness in women's sports. That's it.

Although it is unclear who Barto specifically means by the trans individuals and liberal feminists, there indeed have been such voices opposed to trans women playing women's sports. For example, Renée Richards is a transgender tennis player who sued the United States Tennis Association for refusing to allow her to play in the 1976 U.S. Open Women's draw. Richards has publicly stated that “transsexuals have every right to play, but maybe not at the professional level, because it's not a level playing field.”³⁴ Richards also objected to the International Olympic Committee's 2004 rule that trans athletes can participate in the sport of their chosen gender. The rule requires that transmen and trans women athletes must complete surgery, two years of hormone therapy, and legal transition to their chosen gender before competing. Trans women athletes had to specifically undergo a gonadectomy and surgery on external genitalia.³⁵ Richards has stated that that if she “had surgery at the age of 22, and then at 24 went on the tour, no genetic woman in the world would have been able to come close to [her].” In line with this position, she says, that

there is one thing that a transsexual woman unfortunately cannot expect to be allowed to do, and that is to play professional sports in her chosen field. She can get married, live as a woman, do all of those other things, and no one

³⁴ Bazelon, “The Life of Transsexual Tennis Legend Renée Richards, From Jewish Jocks.”

³⁵ The IOC has since revised this rule. Trans women athletes are no longer required to have surgery and hormone therapy is required for one year instead of two. Transmen athletes may participate “without restriction.”

should ever be allowed to take that away from her. But this limitation—that’s just life. I know because I lived it.³⁶

More recently, Caitlyn Jenner publicly stated that she opposes “biological boys who are trans competing in girls’ sports in schools.”³⁷ Jenner is a trans woman and a former decathlete who won a gold medal in the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. In 2015 she publicly came out as trans, has subsequently starred in her own reality television series, and announced she would run for governor as a Republican candidate in California’s recall election in 2021.

In the same way that Barto’s references to the passage of Title IX hark back to a feminist victory, other conservative entities see women’s success in sport as a victory for women’s equality. In March 2020, the Connecticut Republican Party in Hartford held a SheLeads event to honor Selina Soule, Alanna Smith, and Chelsea Mitchell with SheLeads Connecticut Courage Awards. Soule, Smith, and Mitchell are three Connecticut high school track and field athletes who filed a Title IX lawsuit in June 2019 against Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference (CIAC), claiming that two Andraya Yearwood and Terry Miller have an athletic advantage and deny cisgender athletes the opportunity to compete.³⁸ The event commemorated the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which grants U.S. citizens the right to vote regardless of sex and “serves as an opportunity to celebrate how far women have come due largely to the brave and selfless efforts of women like the

³⁶ Bazelon, Emily. “The Life of a Transsexual Tennis Legend”

³⁷ Reston, “Jenner Opposes Transgender Girls Participating in Girls’ Sports.”

³⁸ Riley, “Despite Office of Civil Rights Action, Fight over Connecticut’s High School Sports Transgender Policy Will Continue.”

Suffragettes.”³⁹ Sue Hatfield, Vice-Chair of the Connecticut Republican Party, told Save Women's Sports that the “overwhelming support for Alanna, Chelsea, and Selina—who I often refer to as ‘Connecticut’s Daughters’ or ‘Modern Day Suffragettes’—has been overwhelming and truly heartwarming.”⁴⁰ In this context, the participation of trans women in sports represents an alarming deviation from the feminist past. Showcasing Soule, Smith, and Mitchell as the modern-day suffragettes—in this case, fighting for the right for cisgender girls and women to compete at the expense of their transgender counterparts—reinscribes the whiteness of this feminist history that indexes its white beneficiaries of women’s organizing.

The Child: Infantilizing Safety, Infantilizing Gender

One of the central arguments the anti-trans sports movement mobilizes is the need to protect girls from a whole range of dangers. As Katherine Bond Stockton argues, the child “is a body said to need protections more than freedoms. And it is a creature who cannot consent to its sexual pleasure, or divorce its parents, or design its education — at least not by law” (2009, 16). The category of the child occupies a strangeness whereby its parameters are not uniformly applied to all children. The terms “juvenile” and “youth” are equally murky; they describe a developmental period between childhood and adulthood where it is unclear where the former ends and the latter begins. Yet groups and constituents whose goal is to “save women’s sports” deploy the figure of a feminized child, a figure in need of protection from “boys” and “males”: protection from taking scholarships and titles; from locker rooms; and from playing sports with boys and men lest getting severely injured.

³⁹ “SheLeads Connecticut Event ~ Honoring Courage Award Recipients.”

⁴⁰ Save Women’s Sports, “Girls in Title IX Case to Be Honored.”

Working in tandem with the impulse to protect the feminized child is a broader paradigm of safety that also frames cis women athletes as more vulnerable to injury if they compete against trans women. The notion of cis women’s compulsory safety only holds if the standard of cis womanhood is that of Western white fragility. In their introduction to “TERF Wars: Feminism and the Fight for Transgender Futures,” Vincent et al. put it succinctly regarding the bathroom wars:

By positioning (cis, white) ‘females’ as a category uniquely vulnerable to the threat of ‘male’ violence (and especially ‘biological’ male sexual violence), trans-exclusionary arguments around toilet access—including those advanced by self-proclaimed feminist groups—lend support to the gendered and misogynistic discourses that have long positioned (white) women as the ‘weaker sex’ needing protection (by men, from men).⁴¹

Gendered racism underscores this misogyny because black and brown trans women are perceived to threaten cis gender normativity and the whiteness that encases it. Caster Semenya’s suspension from World Athletics, and the “gender verification” processes that preceded it, exemplifies this point.

Although the rhetorical *child* is deployed to eliminate the alleged threat that trans women athletes pose, *adult* (cis)women are subsumed within this rhetoric. Even though claims such as “we need to protect our children from [irreversible hormone therapy, competing with or against “boys, sharing a locker room with a boy who believes he’s a girl]” assert that young people are at risk, these claims discursively position trans girls and women as the threat that can ostensibly harm anyone regardless of their age. In other words, policies and arguments that seek to protect children are not always about protecting *exclusively* children, but rather a rationale to police subjects of all ages in the name of future children.

⁴¹ Vincent et al., 6

Taking Away Resources: Hypocrisy & Racism against Yearwood and Miller

Trans-exclusionary arguments in sports are often based on the notion that trans girls and women take away the already-limited amount of resources allocated to girls and women, particularly through Title IX. For example, in a post on SWS called “Save Women,” the author writes, “we are reducing the availability of these role models by allowing men to win in women’s sports and take our scholarships.” A letter to Nancy Pelosi that pleads for her to oppose the Equality Act states, “We refuse to give up the few women-only scholarships and small business programs available. These programs are a necessary and proportional response to women’s historical exclusion from public life and commerce, as well as the different life and career paths women often take.”⁴² This plea is concretized in SWS’s and WoLF’s involvement in the Connecticut Title IX case. Selina Soule, Alanna Smith, and Chelsea Mitchell, the three plaintiffs in the lawsuit, claim that allowing trans athletes Andraya Yearwood and Terry Miller to compete is a violation of Title IX because they take away scholarships and track titles that would otherwise go to the plaintiffs. Descriptions of Yearwood’s and Miller’s, who are both black trans girls, athleticism draw on racist scripts that connect blackness to inherent athleticism. Yearwood and Miller’s athletic success is therefore negated by how their gender is perceived. Soule describes her first encounters with Yearwood and Miller:

Ms. Soule recalls that it was May 2017, at the Middletown Varsity Invitational, when she first saw a “very muscular person with long braided hair completely dominate the race.” She says she knew then that this athlete was “identifying as female versus biologically being a female,” but tried to put it out of her mind. Yet the following year she saw yet another athlete “wearing

⁴² Save Women’s Sports, “Women Unite in Opposition to the So-Called “Equality Act”.”

the men's uniform but [competing] in the girls' events." As she and the other young women were two-thirds into the 100-meter race, two male competitors had "already finished and were doing the chest bump—the thing that the boys do when they do well."⁴³

Soule attributes Yearwood's muscularity and braids—two racial tropes—to her "domination," and not her gender per se. In other words, Yearwood's muscularity and braids are not inherently linked to sex, yet they lead Soule to believe that Yearwood is not "biologically female." At a separate event, Miller "wearing the men's uniform" combined with her and Yearwood doing a chest bump confirms Soule's belief that the two are "male competitors" because chest bumps are what "boys *do* when they do well." Soule confirms Yearwood and Miller's "biology" through performative gender acts—braids, a uniform, and a chest bump. It is *how* Yearwood and Miller do gender that marks them as gender transgressors.

Yearwood's and Miller's transgression is marked at the intersection between their blackness and transness. In a WoLF blog post that explains how male sports writers support various trans women athletes, the author briefly describes Yearwood: "Andraya Yearwood, the Connecticut boy who has made news two years in a row for *stealing* top places in girls' statewide track meets."⁴⁴ Several news outlets included the following statement by the ADF: "The Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), the conservative nonprofit that is representing the plaintiffs, said in a statement CIAC's policy '*robs* female athletes of opportunities because of the physical advantages of males."⁴⁵ These posts use racialized language that reinscribes

⁴³ Johnston, "Girls Don't Chest Bump"; Kearns, "A Connecticut Girl Challenges Male Domination of Female Sports."

⁴⁴ emphasis added, "The Male Sports Writers"

⁴⁵ emphasis added, Maxouris, "3 Connecticut High School Girls"

criminality to black girls. Yearwood and Miller are portrayed as gender frauds by discursively positioning their blackness in proximity to criminality as they rob and steal from the women’s sports in which they participate.

Yet GCF organizations invoke women and girls of color to argue that trans athletes steal already scarce resources that Title IX purportedly grants. For example, in a statement of support for HB 500A in Idaho, also known as the Fairness for Women and Girls in Sports Act, WoLF states that “disparities persist in virtually all U.S. high schools” and that “these disparities are significantly worse for Black and Latino girls.”⁴⁶ In a blog post titled, “Gender Identity Politics are an attack on Women’s Sports,” the author states, “decades after Congress enacted Title IX of the Civil Rights Act...girls are routinely denied opportunities to compete in sports. The disparity is most severe among black girls.”⁴⁷ Commenting on how left-leaning male sports writers support trans women in women’s sports, another blog post reads,

men who would not be competitive when pitted against other men have been able to displace women from top rankings in track, cycling, and boxing. Not only does this harm fall almost entirely on women and girls, it is especially unfair to women and girls of color because they are already disproportionately deprived of opportunities and funding for athletics.⁴⁸

These characterizations are by no means wrong, scholars and activists in sports have long critiqued the ways in which white girls disproportionately benefit from Title IX’s athletic stipulations.⁴⁹ But WoLF and SWS tokenize black and brown girls and women in order to

⁴⁶ “Support for HB 500A”

⁴⁷ “Gender Identity Policies, WoLF”

⁴⁸ “Male Sports Writers”

⁴⁹ Pickett, Dawkins, and Braddock, “Race and Gender Equity in Sports;” Greenlee, “Title IX: Does Help for Women Come at the Expense of African Americans?”; Brake and Williams,

claim that there are not enough of Title IX's resources to go around. More insidiously, though, is GCFs' willingness to suddenly profess that athletic resources belong to black and brown girls, too, just not the trans ones.

Safety

Protection of the feminized child, and the infantilized woman, is often articulated through a paradigm of safety. Claims such as “we need to protect women and girls” draw on sedimented public feelings of fear, disgust, pity, and anger that are mobilized often to exclude “others” and justify the downsizing of public institutions and services, to name just two examples. Scholars have theorized safety and its relationship to affect.⁵⁰ Proponents of excluding trans women in sports often invoke two notions of safety that are contextually different but conceptually similar. The first has to do with cis women and girls' safety while competing or practicing with or against trans women and girls. This idea of safety stems from the belief that cis women and girls are more at risk of getting injured while competing with or against trans women and girls. HR 5603, also known as the Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act, is a federal bill introduced by representative Greg Steube in January 2020. The bill was introduced in response to the Equality Act and would require for the “purposes of determining compliance with title IX...sex shall be determined on the basis of

“The Heart of the Game: Putting Race and Educational Equity at the Center of Title IX.” Women's Sports Foundation, “Race and Sport: The Foundation Position.”

⁵⁰ Meiners, *For the Children?*; Jackson and Meiners, “Fear and Loathing.”

sex assigned at birth by a physician.”⁵¹ Representative Jim Hagedorn, who is a co-sponsor of the bill, stated “Allowing [biological boys and men to compete against girls and women in competitive sports] would severely undermine the integrity of women’s sports and, in some cases, put the safety of female athletes at risk.”⁵²

The second context of safety is invoked more often: the safety of cis women and girls in locker rooms, bathrooms, and other changing areas. Arguments against trans women and girls in sport resemble those made against bills that would allow for bathrooms to be inclusive spaces for transpeople. As Schilt and Westbrook demonstrate in their analysis of bathroom bills, critics of transgender rights assert their opposition by invoking the highly gendered figure of the sexual predator trespassing women’s bathrooms in order to assault women and children (girls). But the pervasiveness and viability of this narrative depends on the construction of “vulnerable subjecthood” that characterizes women and children.⁵³ As Jules Gill-Peterson in her historiographical intervention into the subject of the transgender child points out, bathroom bills mark a “highly contemporary form of anti-trans backlash that has taken the convergence of trans visibility and vulnerability as an opportunity. The putative rhetoric of ‘privacy concerns,’ ‘safety,’ and the egregiously weak proposition that genitals or binary ‘biological sex’ can usefully direct policy are convenient displacements for a naked political violence against trans life.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act of 2020, HR 5603, 116th Congress 2019-2020, In House Committee on Education and Labor.

⁵² Breitbart, “Federal Bill Introduced to Preserve and Protect Female Sports.”

⁵³ Schilt and Westbrook, “Bathroom Battlefields and Penis Panics.”

⁵⁴ Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 196.

GCFs who oppose trans women and girls in women’s sports almost always mention the safety and/or privacy of women and girls in locker rooms, bathrooms, and other changing areas that are often a part of playing sports. As the letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi opposing the Equality Act stated,

We refuse the demand, for ourselves and our daughters, to undress in front of female identifying men in public accommodations or tolerate them undressing in front of us. Concerns seem obvious for women of faith who follow strict guidelines about interaction with the opposite sex, for victims of sexual assault, or for young girls in public restrooms and dressing rooms.⁵⁵

In a blog post on Save Women’s Sports called “biological sex matters, even in sailing,” the author stated, “how will these impressionable girls between 13-18 traveling from all across the United States react when they are faced with a boy in their bathroom or shower? How will the parents react?” the future tense of this scenario invites the reader to imagine girls’ vulnerability in the context that has accrued a lot of political charge. Exacerbated by the image of geographic distance from home due to travel “all across” the United States, the word “bathroom” instead of locker room rhetorically magnifies the girls’ vulnerability. As “impressionable,” these 13-18-year-olds have little agency compared to the boy who, without a qualifier, assumes enough rhetorical, and thereby actual, independence.

It is perhaps not surprising that the same arguments against trans(women’s) access to women’s bathrooms get repeated by opponents of trans women playing women sports, as the specter of the sexual predator preying on the most vulnerable—women and children—carries much political, social, and affective charge.

⁵⁵ Save Women’s Sports, “Women Unite in Opposition to the So-Called ‘Equality Act’.”

Mutilating bodies: Surgical and Hormonal Interventions

Another theme in which children's safety is invoked within the trans sports debate is the risk of surgical and hormonal interventions on young people. While these arguments are dispersed throughout trans-exclusionary online news and blog posts generally, they are also prevalent in sports-related documents. For example, in WoLF's letter to Governor Little of Idaho in support of the Fairness for Women's Sports Act, they state,

We are aware that some groups have demanded exceptions for individuals who claim to have a "gender identity." ... These groups openly seek to normalize the use of harmful medical interventions on vulnerable children, such as the use of puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones that have serious long-term health consequences including in some cases permanent sterility. We oppose these unreasonable demands in the strongest possible terms. No young boy should be encouraged by irresponsible adults to endanger his health and future fertility in order to qualify for a girls' athletic competition.

This position evokes a century-old anxiety whose origins can be traced to women's entry into the modern Olympics games in 1900: that boys and men will infiltrate girls and women's sports in order to more easily gain victory.⁵⁶

In similar language that is risk- and danger-based, WoLF's letter opposing the Equality Act states,

We refuse to believe children innately require sterilization as minors, by chemical or surgical means, in order to affirm fluid gender perceptions, social stereotypes, or personal expressions. Society should seek to protect the health of children's bodies and their natural course of maturation through the turbulent, often distressing years of growth and development. The Equality Act would normalize the practice of gender transitioning of minors, which is dangerously on the rise, especially among adolescent girls.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Peiper, 13-33.

⁵⁷ Save Women's Sports, "Women Unite in Opposition to the So-Called 'Equality Act.'"

Children's agency is most evacuated within this framework as GCFs assert minority status that prevent (or at least inhibit) their capacity to make medical decisions. The protectionist undertones that frame the nebulous figure of the child in this excerpt also condition the child's racialization. How the figure of the child is granted the status of vulnerability is a discursive, and ultimately a material, practice that reflects how racial regimes govern seemingly neutral concepts such as "innocence," "natural course of maturation," and even the category of "childhood" itself.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the broad range of gender critical feminism (what I refer to as GCF) and the individuals and organizations that adjudicate its central tenet: that gender is an oppressive societal concept while sex is an immutable truth that governs the gender binary through a male-female system. While one may identify as a woman even though she was assigned male at birth, GCFs insist that gender identity is immaterial; sex is the criterion that determines what birth marker is on government-issued identification, which gender-segregated bathroom to use, and whether one should play on a women's sports team. This biological determinism eludes how sex is in fact not neatly dimorphic, nor is there one or even two widely accepted criteria for assigning sex (there are at least six).

As a cultural, political, and economic realm, regulated sports, especially at the elite level, holds particularly high stakes in maintaining the fantasy of a level playing field so that every athlete has an ostensibly equal opportunity to compete and win. GCF's stakes in the sporting enterprise is multi-faceted: only people assigned female at birth should play

girls' and women's sports because of alleged indisputable pheno- and genotypical differences. Because of their alignment on this issue, GCF and conservative organizations have built a frenemy relationship, whereby movements that are otherwise opposed agree about a particular issue, albeit for different reasons. For religious and secular conservatives, it is to preserve reproductive marriage and family formation. For GCFs, it is to preserve a notion of womanhood based on gender essentialism so that only cis women can access spaces and resources allocated to women. Sex assignment at birth as that which solely determines whether someone plays on a girl's or boys' team, in the men's or women's division, fulfills the ideological agenda of both constituencies.

Chapter 3: Unfair Advantage Discourse in USA Powerlifting

In January 2019, transfeminine power lifter Jaycee Cooper, along with all other transgender competitors, was banned from USA Powerlifting (USAPL), the organization under which Cooper had competed for the previous three years. In an email to Cooper, the organization denied her request to take spironolactone, an androgen blocker commonly prescribed to transwomen and transfeminine folks. “Male-to-female transgenders,” the email continued, “are not allowed to compete in our static strength sport as it is a direct competitive advantage,” adding that this decision was made at the “IPF level,” which denotes the International Powerlifting Federation, the international governing body of which USA Powerlifting is a member.¹ On May 8, 2019—one week after the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) upheld a regulation that requires women sprinters with high testosterone to lower it in order to compete—the national board of governors for USAPL met to vote on whether or not to accept a transgender policy proposal developed by Cooper and her co-director Breanna Diaz at Pull For Pride, a national deadlifting fundraiser that raises money to directly support LGBTQ homeless youth in the twelve cities where these fundraisers take place. The proposal would allow transgender women to compete in powerlifting provided that their testosterone levels are below and remain below 10nmol/L, which is also in accordance with the IOC’s policies.² The proposal also would allow for intersex athletes to compete according to their gender identity, provided that they undergo drug testing—a mandated rule for all powerlifting competitors. Because current USAPL rules for drug testing

¹ *VICE NEWS*.

² When Diaz’s and Cooper’s proposal was written, the IOC established the threshold at 10 nmol/L until the CAS allowed the IOC to reinstate its 2018 regulation, which set the threshold at 5 nmol/L.

could be skewed to exclude transgender and intersex athletes, Cooper and Diaz’s proposal called for an additional panel to be assembled to individually assess transgender and intersex cases. The panel would include a member of the transgender community, a medical expert who is well-informed on trans issues, and two members of USAPL. Prior to the vote, Dr. Kristopher Hunt, the chair of USAPL Therapeutic Use Exemption (TUE) committee, gave a PowerPoint presentation imbued with scientism in order to convince the national governing board—members who would ultimately vote on whether or not to pass Cooper and Diaz’s proposal—that transgender powerlifters have a “direct advantage.” USAPL voted and rejected the proposal 4–46, with one abstention.

In this article, I trace the sociality of testosterone in Hunt’s presentation, paying particular attention to how it delineates the boundary between “fair” and “unfair advantage” that consolidates anti-trans contours of “female athlete.” The logic of gender binarism that underlies sports’ structuration and intelligibility is also central to the fantasy of a level playing field—that men and women do not compete against each other because the former has an inherent, unilateral advantage over the latter by virtue of being assigned male at birth. Myths and folklore that renders testosterone as the source of this advantage, or what Katrina Karkazis and Rebecca Jordan-Young call “T talk,” has led to the passing of policies and laws that often defer to sports’ tautological “truth” that there must be two separate genders.³ They range from state and federal legislation—some of which are explicitly sports-related and some of which address gender discrimination more broadly—to USA Powerlifting’s ban against transgender powerlifters.⁴

³ Karkazis and Jordan-Young, “The Powers of Testosterone.”

⁴ To name two examples, HB 500 in Idaho, also known as the Fairness in Women’s Sports Act, was signed by Governor Brad Little on March 20, 2020. HB 465 in Montana was

Using T talk as a theoretical framework, this essay examines the social life of a hormone at the scene of sports policy-making within a transfeminist sports archive.

“Leveling” the Playing Field in T Levels

USA Powerlifting’s May 2019 ban against transgender powerlifters is a part of a longer lasting and widespread fear that women’s sports is infiltrated by those who possess an “unfair advantage” over the majority of (cis)women⁵ participants. This unfair advantage, the story goes, is not related to better access to resources such as equipment, coaches, training facilities, clean air, or food but is fractured along gendered lines. Recent scholarship in feminist and queer sports studies investigates the logics of “fair play” discourse that shapes not only how policies are written, but how gender itself is defined.⁶ Specifically, scholars examine historical conditions of “sex testing,” which has targeted athletes such as Caster Semenya, a South African sprinter who was subjected to “sex verification” following her decisive victory in the 800m race at the 2009 World Championships in Berlin.⁷ Indeed, Semenya as well as Dutee Chand, an Indian sprinter who challenged the IAAF’s 2011 policy that prevents intersex women from competing as women, have significantly challenged a

introduced in order to add gender identity to Montana’s human rights act. Stating her opposition to the bill, an attorney of the Montana Family Foundation cited tennis star Martina Navratilova’s op-ed in *The Sunday Times*, whose headline read, “Rules on Trans Athletes Rewards Cheats and Punishes the Innocent” (Navratilova 2019).

⁵ I use the term “cis” in parentheses throughout this essay to denote that policies and intentions are geared toward women, there is either an implicit or explicit connotation that these women are not transgender or intersex.

⁶Karkazis et al., “Out of Bounds?”; Schultz, *Qualifying Times*.

⁷ Dworkin, Swarr, and Cooky, “(In) Justice in Sport: The Treatment of South African Track Star Caster Semenya”; Pieper, *Sex Testing*.

fundamental principle that organizes competitive sports: the separation between men and women because of an inherent “sex gap.”⁸

Although this belief is not particularly new, nor is it unique to sports, what has changed is the particular iteration it has taken over the past ten years.⁹ Whereas sports officials and authorities pointed to chromosomes or gonads per se, governing bodies now pinpoint testosterone as the singular source of “unfair advantage” for women athletes. Meanwhile, transgender athletes’ participation in sports is increasing—from the youth to recreational to elite levels—as governing bodies institute rules and conditions for them to compete.¹⁰ Why, then, has USAPL instituted a blanket ban against transgender powerlifters while governing bodies in other sports allow transgender athletes to compete? Answering this question requires us to examine the *conditions* under which transgender athletes can or cannot compete. Even though USAPL made an outright ban while the IOC and IAAF did not, all three organizations establish various criteria that ultimately point to testosterone—including how much of it and how the body uses it—as that which separates eligibility from ineligibility.

Myths and cultural beliefs about testosterone’s effect on athletic performance is so pervasive that Katrina Karkazis and Rebecca Jordan-Young call it T talk, an entanglement of discourses about testosterone as both a molecular substance and a cultural emblem of

⁸ Karkazis and Jordan-Young, “Debating a Testosterone ‘Sex Gap.’”

⁹ Karkazis and Jordan-Young, “Debating a Testosterone ‘Sex Gap,’” 181-182.

¹⁰ Travers and Deri, “Transgender Inclusion and the Changing Face of Lesbian Softball Leagues”; Griffin and Carroll, Helen, “NCAA Inclusion of Transgender Student-Athletes.”

masculinity.¹¹ T talk operates as a discursive domain in which science and myths are intertwined; scientific claims about testosterone naturalize social beliefs about masculinity, femininity, and normative ideals of proper female and male subjects. In their “unauthorized biography” of testosterone, Karkazis and Jordan-Young show how sweeping claims about the effects of testosterone not only obscure significant variables that affect its functioning but also result in crafting regulations that disproportionately target intersex women from the Global South.¹² In their essay titled, “The Powers of Testosterone: Obscuring Race and Regional Bias in the Regulation of Women Athletes,” Karkazis and Jordan-Young powerfully demonstrate T talk’s ramifications through their analysis of a 2012 presentation given by Stéphane Bermon, a member of the IAAF’s Medical and Anti-Doping Commission at the time.¹³ Using racialized images to depict phenotypical differences between men and women, Bermon’s endorsement to ban intersex women with high testosterone typifies the racialized gendering of normative athleticism—a strategy that becomes important when I turn to Hunt’s presentation.

¹¹ “The Powers of Testosterone,” 7.

¹² Jordan-Young and Karkazis, *Testosterone*.

¹³ Bermon’s presentation coincided with the IOC’s testosterone regulation that went live at the 2012 London Olympics and matches the IAAF’s 2011 testosterone regulation, which placed a cap on testosterone at 10nmol/L for women competing in all events. In 2018, the IAAF amended its 2011 regulation, which now regulates the 400m, 400m hurdles, 800m, 1500m, and the mile races. In addition, the testosterone threshold was also set to 5 nmol/L, shifting the separation between a “high” and “normal” amount (Karkazis and Carpenter 2018). Moreover, in May 2019 the CAS dismissed Semenya’s appeal and upheld the IAAF’s 2018 regulation, which means that she must reduce her testosterone to below 5 nmol/L in order to compete in her signature event, the 800m (Media Release CAS).

It is at this juncture that I pick up where Karkazis and Jordan-Young leave off by investigating how trans¹⁴ athletic embodiment affects and is affected by T talk's circulation. While feminist and queer sports analyses focus on the implication of hormone levels for intersex athletes such as Semenya and Chand, much less scholarship analyzes how the hang up on testosterone itself—whether endogenously produced or pharmaceutically regulated—unjustly targets transgender athletes. Concomitantly, how might sports and athleticism affect how trans studies theorizes the body's social and, as Gill-Peterson puts it, “material itineraries”?¹⁵ As Finn Enke reminds us, “athletics is one of the most common examples used by lay people to ‘prove’ that males and females are ‘really’ (materially and therefore truly, unquestionably, and consistently) different.”¹⁶ While testosterone as a material substance and a socially “sticky” cultural object implicates intersex and transgender athletes, the extent to which both are differently implicated has more significant consequences than what current theorizations and media exposure of transgender and intersex phenomena in sports suggest.¹⁷ As such, I pay attention to how the rhetorical maneuvers, driven by testosterone's social meanings, in Hunt's presentation evoke much longer histories of anti-trans violence. Although rhetorical moves within and beyond USAPL's ban appear to position cisgender female athletes as normative and “proper” gendered subjects against

¹⁴ I use the term trans as a capacious term that signals gender variance and a mode of critique. By “transgender,” I mean to signal an identity or subjectivity.

¹⁵ Gill-Peterson, “The Technical Capacities of the Body” 403.

¹⁶ Enke, Introduction to *Transfeminist Perspectives*, 12-13.

¹⁷ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

transwomen athletes, vis-à-vis chromosomes, “levels,” and expression itself, the regulatory power driving these moves condition the intelligibility of all subjects, athletes or not.

My analysis of Hunt’s presentation also heeds Jennifer Doyle’s call in “The Athletic Issue” of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* to consider what international “headlines might obliterate from our view.”¹⁸ Doyle asserts that voyeuristic media coverage’s fixation on “what” Semenya is obfuscates systemic racism, effeminophobia, and transphobia that condition this fixation in the first place. As a case that is also practically absent from the headlines themselves, my focus on USAPL is illuminating because its transgender exclusion policy is not an international controversy, nor is it too obscure to escape the attention of straight and cisgender constituents outside of the powerlifting world, let alone trans-exclusionary groups that are invested in reserving women’s sports solely for cisgender women. Neither sparking global response from all fronts nor representing the banal, USAPL’s ban on transgender powerlifters resides in the area in between, often at risk of oversight. Consequently, my analysis is one attempt to investigate the broader implications of the media’s overexposure of an elite few through an epistemological pursuit of what is not always the most visible.

T Talk in the USAPL Transgender Policy Presentation

On May 9, 2019, USAPL’s governing board convened in order to vote on whether or not to pass a transgender participation policy put forth by Breanna Diaz and Jaycee Cooper, co-directors of Pull for Pride and competitive powerlifters. The proposed policy would amend USAPL’s current policy that prohibits transmen and transwomen from competing in

¹⁸ Doyle, “Dirt off Her Shoulders” 423.

the organization. Transmen undergoing hormone treatment therapy (HRT) have an advantage, USAPL contends, because they take a steroid (testosterone) that is otherwise prohibited to all male powerlifters. If transwomen provide medical documentation that shows that they have decreased their serum testosterone—usually through spironolactone, colloquially known as “spiro”—USAPL insists that effects of testosterone exposure during puberty have irreversible effects on the body and therefore give them an unfair advantage over their competitors.

Dr. Kristopher Hunt, who is the chair of the TUE that evaluates individual cases where competitors medically take prohibited substances, presented to the board of over fifty voters the TUE’s rationale for banning transgender powerlifters. As per the IOC’s guidelines, transwomen Olympians can compete provided that their testosterone fall below 5 nmol/L for twelve months prior to competition. Hunt announced, however, that his presentation provides sufficient evidence that *any* “male-to-female competing in the female category is unfortunately at an unfair advantage.”¹⁹ At the onset, Hunt establishes that the purpose of his presentation is to have an “open, honest, [and] dispassionate evaluation” of medical literature in order to ensure fair play as deemed by the IOC, which states that their “overriding sporting objective is and remains the guarantee of fair competition.”²⁰ Hunt introduces his presentation on transwomen powerlifters with a definition of sex and gender. Gender, for Hunt, is viewed on a continuum and is legal to change, while sex is

being male or female according to reproductive organs and the functions assigned by chromosomal complement, so XX for female and XY for male....

¹⁹ Hunt, “USA Powerlifting,” 9:17-9:24.

²⁰ Hunt, “USA Powerlifting,” 10:34-10:39; 10:50-10:54.

Sex matters in all matters of cellular function and physiology from “womb to tomb.”²¹

From the start, Hunt establishes a binary model of sex that hinges on a kind of gender fatalism, where chromosomal configuration determines “all matters.” These matters not only include biological function, represented here through cells and physiology, but social life itself—bookended by one’s birth and death. In other words, one’s sex chromosomes directly determine somatic function even though one may live in a social context that has material effects on the body. In addition to sex chromosomes, according to Hunt, a person’s reproductive organs also determine sex yet feminist biologists have critiqued the reproductive organs model of sex, as women may have undescended testes and/or an absence of a uterus due to intersex variations and hysterectomies.

In order to establish fair play in powerlifting, Hunt continues, his goal is to answer what he calls the central question: Is someone who was “birth[ed] into an XY” and who took an antiandrogen for twelve months “equivalent to [a] birth into XX as to assume fair play”?²² In order to determine this, Hunt poses a subset of questions: what is the “XY” advantage over an “XX”; what is the effect of an antiandrogen on the former’s performance; and is the performance of an XY on an antiandrogen the same as an XX, all of which were displayed on a slide titled, “Fair Play” [see figure 1]. What is particularly striking is how the bottom line, literally and figuratively, is expressed as a math problem: “XY + spironolactone = XX?” Hunt’s equation is the bow on a straightforward package of what is otherwise a set of medically complex questions. But the discursive work that this slide performs is also

²¹Wizemann, and Pardue in Hunt.

²² Hunt, “USAPL TUE Committee Report, 2019,” 17.

illuminating. XY is code for someone assigned male at birth and XX for someone assigned female at birth, rhetorically abstracting sex into two signs and becoming a visual dog whistle neutralized through biological terms and the irrefutability of mathematics. Hunt's use of chromosomal sex homogenizes both the XY and XX categories and situates them as mutually exclusive, rhetorically eliminating the extent of human physical variation as more than what the categories of the "two sexes" suggest. In addition, how any human body responds to both endo- and exogenous androgens is nuanced and individually based. Because the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) states that HRT is individualized, one would need to ask in relation to Hunt's equation what the testosterone "level"²³ of the XY person is before transitioning; what other medical conditions may interact with HRT; and how might this person's organs and bodily systems impact and be impacted by their athletic performance? Hunt's T talk—endowed with the authority of science—forgoes evidence to support his claim that sex is dimorphic because it is already supported by a *cultural* and *societal* belief that there are two clear-cut sexes.

Hunt also reduces HRT to simply taking an antiandrogen, removing other factors at work. Estrogen combined with an androgen blocker, usually spironolactone, constitute a common approach to feminizing HRT. In some cases progesterone, is also added. Spironolactone is involved in anti-androgen receptor activity and prevents androgen receptors from synthesizing hormones like testosterone and dihydrotestosterone. While spironolactone operates at the receptor level of cells, estrogen and progesterone are antigonadotropins that suppress androgen production in the gonads. These details matter

²³ Level is in quotations to denote that one's testosterone is not static, but fluctuates according to circadian rhythm, social context, and even competition.

because estrogen, fifty percent of what constitutes the most common approach to feminization HRT, is absent from Hunt's "Fair Play" slide and therefore elides a major part of the process. Dropping estrogen and progesterone, then, does not necessitate a review of their side effects, which often includes loss in muscle mass, increase in and redistribution of body fat, both of which impact athletic performance. If the hang up on testosterone's effect on athletic performance drives USAPL's transgender policy, attention to an athlete's concomitant increase in estrogen *as a result* of the spironolactone is also worth considering. Most importantly this slide is overwhelmingly about the very substance that is absent from it: testosterone. This is the very crux of T talk: the pervasive belief that the subject of fair play is unequivocally about testosterone, which makes any mention of it during a discussion of androgens and chromosomes redundant and unnecessary. To question if the effects of an antiandrogen on an XY person's bone density, liver function, endocrine system, or muscular system are implicated in fair play would therefore seem puzzling.

Hunt presented an analysis of powerlifting data on 11,000 males and 6,351 females from 1,300 competitions.²⁴ After showing several slides of statistical analysis that would be effectively illegible to someone outside the field of statistics, the audience is left to rely on Hunt's conclusion, which is that the male powerlifters lift 47% more weight than female powerlifters. Yet, this still does not answer the question that Hunt himself posed, which is what effect does an antiandrogen have on someone assigned male at birth, or in Hunt's nomenclature, an XY person?

²⁴ Hunt, "USAPL TUE Committee Report, 2019," 24.

“Fair Play”

- **Determination if:**
 - Birth into XY
 - Then antiandrogen x 12 mo (often spironolactone)
 - Equivalent to birth into XX as to assume fair play
- **How?**
 - What is the XY advantage in PL on total vs. XX?
 - What is the effect of antiandrogen on total?
 - Is XY on antiandrogen equitable to XX?
 - Equation format: XY + spironolactone = XX?

Figure 1. “Fair Play” PowerPoint slide in Dr. Kristopher Hunt’s “USAPL TUE Committee Report, 2019”

Now, Hunt admitted that he had data on “people that have taken spironolactone” but because of impending IRB approval, he could not present the results. A gross evaluation of the data, he continued, suggests that spironolactone led to a decrease in performance but that it can be overcome by improving other variables such as diet or training. Optimizing *any* variables in one’s athletic regimen is the entire point of training in the first place. Curiously, Hunt drew on the very factors that could bestow an unfair advantage, but are almost always not read as such, as a way to over-ride the effects of spironolactone. If factors such as the food and the access to resources are powerful enough to negate spironolactone’s effect on performance, one might ask why these same factors, let alone their uneven distribution, are not subject to the same scrutiny as testosterone.

Hunt’s next slide juxtaposed pre- and post-transition performance totals of Olympic lifter Laurel Hubbard. To be clear, Olympic weightlifting is different from powerlifting in at least two ways. The first has to do with the types of lifts performed. In Olympic weightlifting, athletes perform two lifts called the snatch and the clean and jerk. In powerlifting, athletes perform three lifts: the dead lift, the bench press, and the squat. This leads to the second difference, which has to do with the type of strength that Olympic weightlifting and powerlifting respectively test in the human body. The former tests for explosive strength while the latter tests for static strength. The left side of the slide shows that in 1998, Hubbard competed in the male category and lifted 300kg, which is the total weight lifted between the snatch and the clean and jerk. The right side of the slide shows that in 2017—five years post-transition and at thirty-seven years of age—Hubbard lifted 280kg, which indicates a “7% difference only” [see Figure 2].

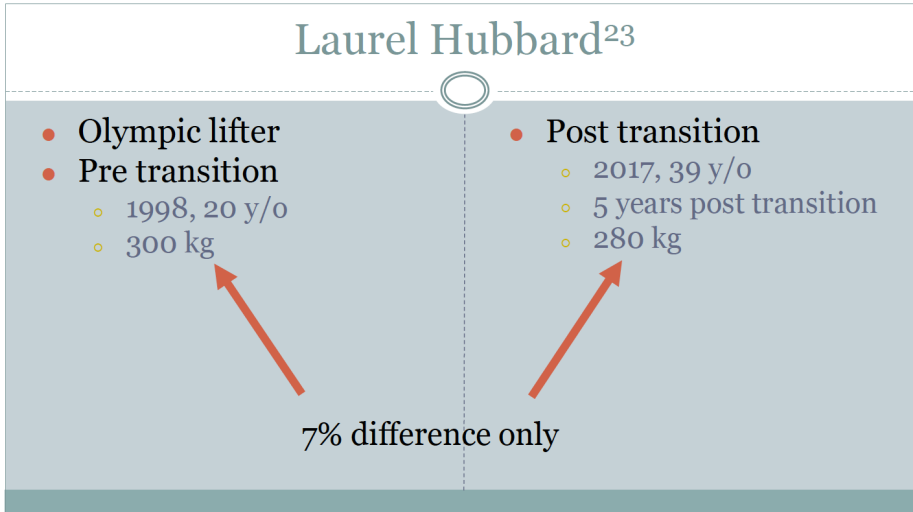


Figure 2. “Laurel Hubbard” PowerPoint slide, “USAPL TUE Committee Report, 2019”

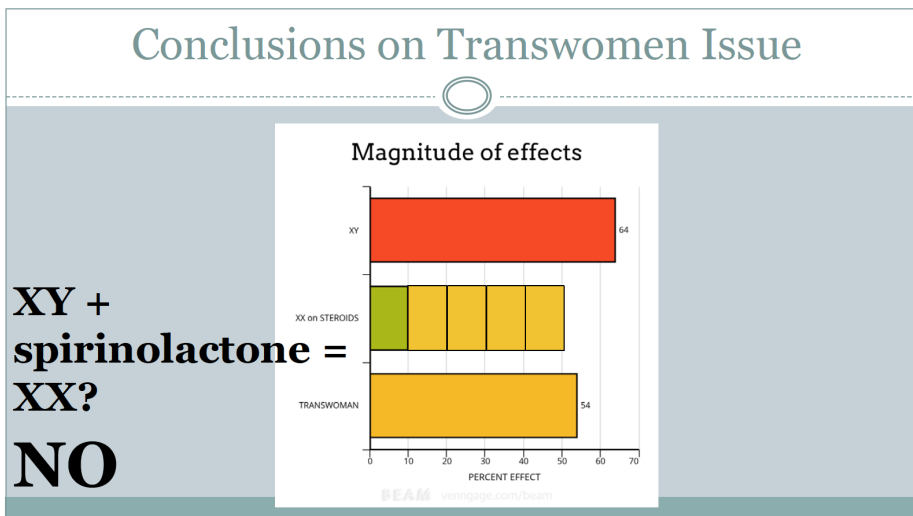


Figure 3. “Conclusions on Transwomen Issue” PowerPoint slide, “USAPL TUE Committee Report, 2019.”

The problem with this evidence is twofold. First, Hunt displayed Hubbard’s *highest* total out of all of Hubbard’s results since she transitioned. In other events, Hubbard totaled 275kg and 273kg.²⁵ Second, and more significantly, Hunt presents a juxtaposition between two results that depict a 7% difference without explaining possible factors that contributed to this decrease in the first place. Consequently, the audience is meant to conclude that the sole reason why Hubbard showed “a 7% difference only” is because of her testosterone level pre-transition. But the power of T talk in part relies on the seemingly self-evident notion that testosterone is a mega source that out-performs all other factors that influence athletic performance, such as diet, training, and physical and mental health. Hunt’s next move situates the slide on Hubbard as *the* piece of evidence that, for Hunt, proves transwomen powerlifters should not compete in the women’s category. In what he calls “the most important slide here,” he summarizes his conclusion of the aforementioned data by declaring that 1) the testosterone level of an XY person—code for a cisgender man—has an effect of 64%; 2) steroids (testosterone) would have a 10% effect on an XX person—code for a cisgender woman—and 3) a transwoman taking an antiandrogen would still have a performance advantage of 54% due to her testosterone exposure during puberty. In equation form, Hunt thus concludes that “XY + spironolactone = XX? NO” [see Figure 3].

²⁵ International Weightlifting Federation, “Athletes / Bios.”

Mary Gregory

@ Instagram

75marylifts [Follow](#)

124 posts 733 followers 538 following

Mary Gregory
 - she/ her
 - USAPL VA state Ref
 - pre HRT 408/ 298/ 507
 - post HRT 314/ 233/ 424
 - inclusive Strength coaching, inclusivestrength19@gmail.com

23% different squat
 22% different bench
 16% different deadlift
 20% different total

Pre - BWT 220
 Post - BWT - 181

Figure 4. “Mary Gregory” PowerPoint slide, “USAPL TUE Committee Report, 2019”

Hunt turned to another individual—transgender powerlifter, Mary Gregory, who transitioned in April 2018 and competed in April 2019 in a raw²⁶ powerlifting tournament. She placed first in her age and weight class, but the president of 100% Raw Powerlifting Federation Paul Bossi declared that “clearly she’s not female...not biologically anyways” and stripped her of her titles and banned her from competing in the federation.²⁷ Hunt displayed a screenshot of Gregory’s Instagram page that displayed her pre- and post-HRT, which Hunt calculated as a difference of 20% [see Figure 4]. Hunt used this percentage in order to then make an impromptu comparison between Taylor Atwood and Jennifer Thompson, both cisgender and renowned powerlifters in the United States. Hunt states that Atwood’s best total is 1,700 pounds, which is the combined weight lifted between the squat, the bench press, and the deadlift, and that Thompson’s is 1,100 pounds. If Atwood transitioned, Hunt declared, he would go down about two weight classes and his total would decrease about 20%, which is the percentage Hunt deduced from Mary Gregory’s Instagram page. Even at 1300lbs, Hunt continues, Atwood would still beat the best woman’s best total by 200 lbs. Yet, the comparison itself is arbitrary—Atwood and Thompson are two of the best American powerlifters but otherwise compete in different weight classes, are sixteen years apart in age, and Atwood competes mostly in equipped competitions while Thompson competes almost exclusively in raw tournaments. That Hunt’s Atwood-Thompson comparison makes its way into his presentation is precisely how T talk functions. It is a digestible comparison for the audience who are all well-versed in powerlifting but one that

²⁶ Raw powerlifting means that lifters do not use supportive devices while performing their lifts.

²⁷Maese, “Stripped of Women’s Records, Transgender Powerlifter Asks, ‘Where Do We Draw the Line?’”

evades any consideration of the rhetorical violence implicated in its ad-lib evocation, much less any scientific inquiry. Thus, it evokes a transphobic sentiment about what it might mean to be trans, that it is simply to take a pill, or that someone's transition is so straightforward that it yields foreseeable and clear-cut results.

Most important is the way that Hunt positioned Thompson in relation to his sentiment of “preserving the integrity of women’s sports,” which he declared just a few slides before. With Mary Gregory’s Instagram page still on display, Hunt turned to Thompson herself who was in the audience and said, “thank you for everything you’ve done for *our* sport. You’ve gotten my fiancé into this, so thank you.”²⁸ This short interjection appeals to what a cisgender woman has done for “our” sport. Thompson is a white forty-six-year-old high school math teacher in North Carolina and is an eleven-time world champion powerlifter. On her website, she says that her inspiration is “to show that you don’t have to look like a man to lift like one.”²⁹ Thompson thus plays a pivotal symbolic role in demonstrating that a ciswoman—without the aid of testosterone—can dominate powerlifting and still retain her feminine appearance. Thompson the individual and the figure reproduces gender normativity as much as she reproduces gendered whiteness: her whiteness and cisness congeal to signify “normal” and “real” womanhood that USAPL aspires to protect. Hunt’s direct address to Thompson in the audience shifted his role as an ostensibly objective representative of USAPL to a practitioner whose fiancé—a ciswoman—is also practicing powerlifting because of the addressee. “Our sport”—that is, Hunt’s and Thompson’s—discursively positioned them as gatekeepers of women’s powerlifting.

²⁸ Hunt, “USA Powerlifting,” 44:14–44:20.

²⁹ “132 Pounds of Power Jen Thompson.”

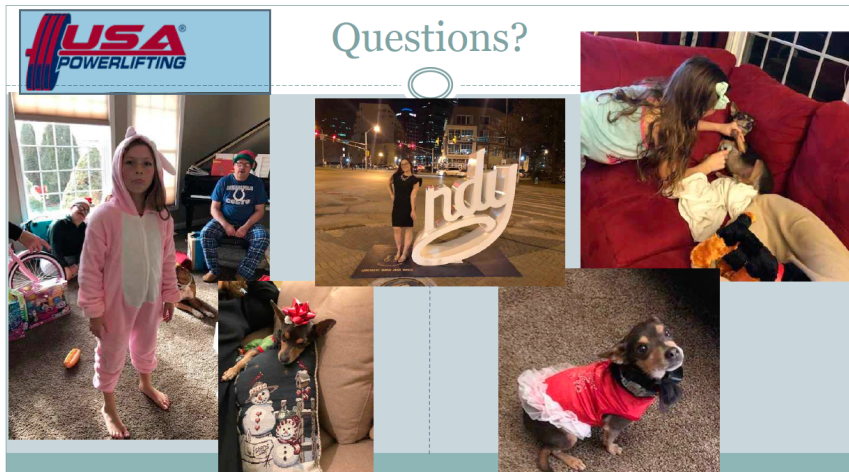


Figure 5. “Questions?” PowerPoint slide, “USAPL TUE Committee Report, 2019”

Hunt's presentation made a bizarre conclusion. As he clicked to his final slide that depicts a photo collage of his daughter, he states:

there's a lot of articles [*sic*] out there saying that men don't have an opinion on this matter, that I shouldn't be talking about this matter... because it doesn't affect us. Well, it affects everybody because everybody has a woman that they love, everybody has several women in their lives that have affected them in some way...so to bring this to a personal level, this is my daughter-to-be. I'm in the adoption process with her. She's a ten-year-old girl, she's probably the most life-changing part of my whole world...I would like to see her grow and prosper into a world where she has a level playing field. That's why this matters to everybody right, a level playing field? And that's what I think we have in our world here at USAPL and I'd like to keep it that way.³⁰

In the final slide of his presentation, Hunt showed a five-photo collage. In one of the photos, his daughter dons a pajama onesie on what appears to be Christmas morning, as two people in the background are also in pajamas, surrounded by toys and wearing Santa hats. In another photo, she is on a red couch, wearing a stethoscope, and checking the heartbeat of what appears to be the family dog, a small terrier. But his daughter is only in two of the five photos. In the remaining photos, two are of the dog—with one in a costume and the other with a stick-on Christmas bow on its head. The last photo shows a young woman posing next to an “Indy” sign in Indianapolis. Because the woman is not Hunt's ten-year-old daughter, the viewer might glean that it is his fiancée, about whom he gave an aside during his presentation. A familial sentiment frames this slide as well as the final ten minutes in which he implored the audience to keep transwomen out of USA Powerlifting if they “have a woman in their life that they care about.”

Through his performative alliance with women powerlifters and rhetorical protection of women's sports, Hunt positioned himself as an ally to women looking to preserve

³⁰ Hunt, “USA Powerlifting,” 47:00–48:25.

(cis)women's spaces. Hunt's paternal relationship with his daughter authenticates his role as a guardian of the girl's and women's sports in which his daughter participates. Women's powerlifting—and women's sports more broadly—is represented here as the figure of a ten-year-old white girl whose innocence and cisfemininity must be protected. Yet Hunt's paternalistic and protectionist undertones echo trans-exclusionary feminist discourses that dehumanize and violently target transwomen, particularly transwomen of color. If a young girl symbolizes the fragility and purity of women's sports, transwomen are the trespassers seeking to dominate them, a metaphor in a much longer history of transphobia and violence against trans people. The reproduction of the white family in this slide articulates the whiteness of ciswomen's sports and is haunted by the racial limits of Title IX, resources from which disproportionately benefit white girls and women in sports. Ironically, trans-exclusionary feminist groups vehemently oppose transwomen playing women's sports in the name of Title IX while hardly mentioning the law's failure to equally extend its protections to girls and women of color.

Although Hunt sought to establish a dispassionate and objective environment devoid of emotion at the beginning of this presentation, in actuality he secured a hierarchy of emotions that positioned himself as the arbiter of truth and ally to women while framing transgender powerlifters and supporters as the unruly dissenters consumed with fervor. Talk—a network of faulty claims about testosterone and a synonym for hegemonic masculinity—reproduces meaning through “sideways moves, indirect logics, resonances, reinforcements, and disavowals, relying on images and aesthetics as much as words.”³¹ Many

³¹ “The Powers of Testosterone,” 9.

presentations similar to Hunt's take place as sports organizations from the recreational and local to international levels decide on what and how policies impact transgender athletes.

Conclusion

I have attempted to outline one instance of how a ban against transgender athletes took place, the figures involved, and the discourses that shaped not just the exclusion of these athletes in USAPL, but how gender and embodiment are produced—vis-à-vis testosterone—in sports. Discourses about masculinity and femininity in relation to athleticism and gendered performance are not unique to Hunt or his presentation. They are drawn from and reproduced by sedimented layers of what it means to be an athlete who is also a woman. How strong is too strong to be considered not “woman” enough? One of the dangerous results of rationales such as Hunt's is that it places all women athletes under surveillance for any and all types of gender transgression, particularly if it is at odds with her athletic excellence. Equally dangerous is the cunning façade this particular iteration of surveillance takes this time around: scientific objectivity, questionable statistical projections, and emotional asides to protect ciswomen powerlifters.

My analysis of Hunt's presentation is emblematic of our current trans-exclusionary present in sports. The figure of the young white girl—personified by Hunt's daughter, for example—is the main character in a narrative that depicts her athletic future under threat, a future that feminists and athlete-activists organized to secure through title IX's 1972 legislation. Yet, as feminist sports studies scholars have demonstrated, this evades the fact that title IX's benefits are not equally accessible to girls and women of color (Brake 2010; Cahn 2014; McDonald 2006). Gender critical groups such as Save Women's Sports and Fair

Play for Women advance the language of rights-based protection of women and girls in sports through “biology-based eligibility standards” (Save Women’s Sports 2020). Leading up to the presentation, Hunt and other members of USAPL consulted with Fair Play for Women, which markets itself as proffering legal and scientific counsel “to help make good policy which maintains fairness and safety for women and girls” (Fair Play for Women 2020). What is clear is that trans exclusionary discourse in sports propel a future for a young girl who is not only cisgender, but also white.

Hunt’s presentation also offers insight into the process of policy-making that specifically affects transgender athletes. While he did briefly address intersex powerlifters, he stated that the TUE had not reached a conclusion on how to ensure fair competition with their participation. Specifically, Hunt spent, chronologically, one minute on transmen powerlifters, five minutes on the IOC’s and IAAF’s stance on intersex athletes—three minutes of which he spent on clarifying that XY folks are male and XX folks are female—and the remaining forty-nine minutes on transwomen in powerlifting. It is also worth noting that Hunt introduced women with complete androgen insensitivity syndrome (CAIS) as “mostly female” and used actress Jamie Lee Curtis as an example as he declared, “she’s very female, in fact she’s all woman” (36:43–36:54). I state how Hunt distributed his time not as simply a call to recognize the degree of fixation on transwomen in one presentation, although this is important. Instead, this chapter seeks to interrogate the conditions that enable it.

Chapter 4: Sporting Transfemininities

CJ: do you ever find yourself self-conscious when you hit a hard spike or a hard shot or you almost take out a player because you hit the ball hard. Do you feel like, "Oh shit. I wonder if anyone--"

Tia: No I don't. Not at all. Cause like I said, there's other women that are stronger than me and they could hit somebody directly in the face or they'll hit the ball straight down and like at the corners, they love it. They love competition. There's no issues.

Tia is a native Hawaiian woman in her mid-thirties and, as she put it, she was “playing volleyball out of the womb.”¹ Before she responded, my full question to her was going to be, “‘I wonder if anyone attributes my hitting the shit out of the ball to my transness and not my skills.’ Does that every come up for you?” Anticipating my question, Tia gave an unequivocal “no.” That Tia knew the question I was going to ask indicates that she is well aware of this viewpoint; I imagine that it was not the first time someone had asked her. As I detailed in chapter 2, two common arguments that opponents of trans women in sports advance is that transwomen have an unfair advantage over cis woman and that they pose a threat to their teammates’ and opponents’ safety. The safety risk, the argument goes, has to do with their exponentially higher strength and power (because they were assigned male at birth) and therefore they risk injuring someone during training or competition. But in her response Tia, who was training in hopes of playing for Team USA Volleyball in the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, also redirects the essence of my question to underscore a central feature in sports: competition. Throughout our interview Tia consistently mentioned that sharpening her skills as a volleyball player is the whole point of competition; not only does it make her better, it makes those on the receiving end of her spikes better as well. This is a common

¹ Tia Thompson, Interview by Author, Telephone, September 4, 2020.

sentiment in competitive sports: training with and/or competing against skilled players is an opportunity to refine one's own skills.

This brief exchange between Tia and me offers a glimpse of two themes that emerged from my interviews. The first theme that I explore is how my interviewees discussed the impact that hormone replacement therapy had on their athletic capacity. The second theme is the joy and gender affirmation they described in relation to playing their sport. Before elaborating these themes, I summarize the findings of a 2019 meta-synthesis conducted by Perez-Samaniego et al. in which they consolidate several topics that arose from their review of qualitative research articles based on interviews with trans people in sports. Their conclusions serve as a point of departure for building on existing literature about trans women's lived experiences in sports.

Transwomen athletes in Qualitative Research

In their 2019 meta-synthesis of qualitative literature that focuses exclusively on trans people in sports, Perez-Samaniego et al. searched several databases for scholarly articles that focus on trans people in sports.² They narrowed down their list of 334 documents by identifying criteria for the purpose of their article: the article had to use qualitative methods and draw from the experiences of trans people as direct participants. This drastically reduced their list to 31, 12 of which were used because of their extensive theoretical background and analysis of data. Of all of the participants interviewed among the 12 articles, 34 were trans women, 40 were trans men, one was intersex, and three identified as being fluid or having no

² In their search, they also employed similar keywords such as “physical activity,” “exercise,” “leisure,” and “recreation,” Pérez-Samaniego et al., “Experiences of Trans Persons in Physical Activity and Sport.”

gendered identification. Perez-Samaniego et al. then identified major themes across this literature: problematic use of gendered language; discomfort and public scrutiny in athletic facilities; coping strategies such as trans men packing and binding, transwomen restraining sports skills; and abjection. Specifically for transwomen, abjection meant being perceived as a threat, struggling to play in lesbian leagues; and perception as not being a “real” woman.³

Elements of these themes were present either directly or indirectly and to varying degrees in my eleven interviews with transwomen athletes. Because I anticipated that these themes would come up, I conducted and interpreted my interviews alongside some of the main arguments put forth by GCFs, a particular facet of backlash that in and of itself is less analyzed. I even asked most of my interviewees directly whether or not anti-trans feminists have attempted to contact them. I also wanted to know about how they got into sports (including the one they currently play), how (if at all) their transness is implicated in their involvement, and how their HRT process affects their training and performance. As Perez-Samaniego et al. show, these aspects of trans athletic embodiment are less discussed in the literature. Furthermore, I also asked about what brings them to continue to play their sport despite broader hostility toward trans people (trans women in particular). My experience as a genderqueer athlete partly informed this inquiry, as I was often weighing the pros and cons of going to wrestling practice, playing in a softball tournament, or attending a women’s Brazilian Jiu Jitsu class. Downsides I would consider are access to gender-neutral or single-stall bathrooms, our co-ed team getting accused of playing two guys in the batting line-up, or feeling the discomfort emanating from my sparring partner in wrestling or BJJ. But the

³ Pérez-Samaniego et al., “Experiences of Trans Persons in Physical Activity and Sport,” 444.

upsides would include spending a weekend with my softball friends, feeling empowered from an endorphin rush after wrestling to the point of vomiting. Perhaps my personal curiosity to see how fellow trans people navigated these challenges over-guided my research questions. But if transmasculine athletes are hardly the focus of the trans sports controversy, I was left all the more interested in how *transwomen* navigated these challenges with the added layer of sexist and transphobic denigration of their athletic pursuit.

Effects of HRT

All of the woman that I interviewed had started feminizing hormone therapy, which is a particularly form of gender-affirming medical care that typically consists of an androgen blocker, to reduce endogenous testosterone (and subsequently its masculinizing effects) and estrogen, to induce feminizing effects.⁴ The androgen blocker that is commonly prescribed is spironolactone (spiro hereafter), although other medications are also used.⁵ Estradiol, which is bioidentical to estrogen, is typically taken in the form of an oral pill, transdermal patch, or injectable. Spiro and estradiol are both commonly used for reasons other than gender-affirming hormone therapy. For example, estradiol can be prescribed for menopause symptoms, osteoporosis prevention after menopause, and to treat prostate and breast cancer. Spiro is often prescribed to treat high blood pressure, heart failure, and fluid retention in people who have liver cirrhosis and hypokalemia, or low blood potassium. Spiro can also be prescribed to cis women to treat acne when other acne treatments are insufficient.⁶ This is

⁴ Rainbow Health Ontario, “Reference Guide for Feminizing Hormone Therapy.”

⁵ Cyproterone, for example, can be prescribed as an alternative to spironolactone.

⁶ American Academy of Dermatology Association, “Stubborn Acne?”

worth noting that people, beyond those seeking gender-affirming hormone therapy, take these medications that alter hormone levels in their body.

Lirael is white and lives in Santa Maria, California where she works as a night auditor at a hotel. She first got into Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) around the same time she came out. She feared that living openly as a transwoman, she would be more at risk of assault and so she wanted to learn self-defense techniques. At the time that I interviewed her, she had been training for three years and attending BJJ classes three to four times per week. She was coming up on what she calls her two-year “tranniversary,” or the day that she came out to herself as transgender.⁷ A few months later, she started taking spiro and estradiol. She got an orchiectomy, or testicle removal, so that she could stop taking spiro due to its common side effect of frequent urination. Lirael continues to take estrogen once per week. As she was describing the clinical process of her transition, I asked her what her testosterone level was: “So, before I started anything I was like about, I think I was like 680 and last time that I went in and got it checked it’s down to 12.”⁸ According to “normal” test results, the range of total testosterone for people assigned male at birth is 280 to 1,000 ng/dL; for people assigned female at birth 15 to 70 ng/dL. After her response I told her that I asked what her current levels were because I had researched that performance in sport is more complicated than simply being exposed to relatively higher levels of testosterone. She responded,

It is. I noticed a *very big* difference, like pre-HRT to like being on it for, you know, a year and nine months. Like it is such a big difference in training. It’s unreal...For example, before I could do 30 pull-ups, no issue, I could do 100 push-ups. Like my arms were in pretty good shape. And [Brazilian] Jiu Jitsu that first year just got me into great shape without changing anything in my

⁷ Lirael, Interview by Author, Telephone, September 25, 2019.

⁸ University of Rochester Medical Center, “Total Testosterone.”

routine. [After going on HRT] I went from weighing 165 to 180 pounds, and that's now where my body's kind of locked into and I can barely do 10 pull ups and I can maybe do 25 pushups now without changing my workout regimen. It just, the amount of muscle mass diminished in my arms. The amount of strength I had just went way down, which made my technique have to get way better.

Jamie is a white woman in her late thirties, a manager of a burger chain in Utah, and plays slow pitch softball throughout the United States. During our interview she had told me several instances of encountering other women softball players at tournaments who were skeptical about, if not outright opposed to, her playing women's softball. If the other woman was open to having a conversation, Jamie would explain some of the effects of decreasing testosterone, such as decreased muscle mass.⁹ She then tells me about a friend of hers,

who's super conservative and we used to go to the gym together and I would bench press 225 pounds. No problem. I would rep that, four sets of 12, when I started hormone replacement therapy, I dropped to 135 pounds. And she was like, "yo, this is real." And I was like, "I mean, I'm not... there's no sense in me trying to get an advantage to play slow pitch softball. We're not talking about the Olympics, right? Like we're talking about slow pitch softball." And then that opens the door to have that conversation.

Similar to Lirael, Jamie also experienced a decreased amount of weight that she was able to push after starting hormone therapy. Explaining that she is not competing in the Olympics but slow-pitch softball, Jamie also shares her experience with others to combat the notion that transwomen in sports are cheating.

Mary forty-four and works two jobs, one as a personal trainer and the other as a sales associate at GNC. also experienced a significant drop in the amount of weight she was able to lift after starting HRT:

⁹ Jamie Neal, Interview by Author, Telephone, October 16, 2019.

literally within a month of taking hormones, I was in the gym and I literally lost 30, 40 pounds off all my lifts within a month of going on. It's crazy. Um, I don't have the same endurance I used to have. Training is a lot harder for me now. I supplement with a waxy maize or dextrose ... so I can train for, you know, an hour and a half, two hours at a time sometimes because I have a lot less energy. My recovery is a little different.¹⁰

Kate is a white New Zealander in her early-twenties and competes in downhill mountain biking. She is completing her master's degree in medical device development at Auckland University of Technology. At the time of our interview, she had been on androgen blockers for five years and had been taking estrogen for four years. She had also mentioned that "as the kids would say [I've] done the whole shebang...I had bottom surgery eleven weeks ago yesterday."¹¹ I then asked her if she noticed any differences in her training or performance. She said that the difference for her was minimal because she started to train seriously at around the same time that she started HRT:

So it was less a case that I had a significant drop in my performance and more a case of I plateaued significantly earlier than you would have expected for someone who was training with [higher] testosterone, for example. So my lifts increased a lot as I started training and when I started transitioning, I sort of flattened out very early. And also now when I stop training, I lose muscle really significantly quicker than I maybe used to. And I have to work a lot harder to maintain that. So it was never that I had a significant drop in performance more than I had to work significantly harder to keep my performance at that level and to increase it.¹²

Chloe is an undergraduate student in her late twenties and plays volleyball. She had been doing hormone replacement therapy for four years by the time she was playing at a

¹⁰ Mary Gregory, Interview by Author, Skype, December 7, 2019.

¹¹ By "bottom surgery," it is unclear whether Kate referred to an orchiectomy and/or vaginoplasty.

¹² Kate Weatherly, Interview by Author, Zoom, September 5, 2020.

division 3 university. She noticed significant differences in her body's ability to recover as well as her frequency of injuries:

I basically nuked my testosterone...my testosterone was basically at zero for the entirety of playing community college and NCAA volleyball and I was having a lot of issues with my muscles and bones taking a lot of a beating and never recovering. So, I never actually felt like I was improving either because no matter how much I tried to work out, it felt like I was never actually gaining a lot of muscle...I just found myself having infinitely more injuries than I ever had when I was on testosterone. I would have looser joints, so like my knees would pop out a little bit more. They had a bit of issues that I had never had when I was on testosterone and I just found that I had a lot more issues with my body that I'd never really experienced.¹³

Chloe also described the difference in terms of how she was able to move and comport herself on the volleyball court:

When I first started in my brain as an athlete, you have calibrated how your body responds to situations. Like, you know, you see a ball moving somewhere and you're like, 'Okay, I run here, I swing here.' Or like, you know, I get my approach now. I would get there in about this time, I'll jump and swing. All of that I had learned and that had become part of my body and like my brain and muscle memory...So like things that at the start of my hormones that I was able to do, even [after] six months, I found myself lagging behind...So instead of making the normal approach time, it was like delayed and I found myself just completely missing the target entirely.

Chloe's description of movement on the volleyball court suggests that the differences manifest in ways beyond static strength performance. By "calibration," she refers to how she trained her body to move in particular ways that are conducive to any given action on the volleyball court. Although it is unclear what the numerical valuation of her testosterone was when she says she "nuked" it, her point is that it was drastically lower compared to pre-HRT. After starting HRT and realizing that her body did not respond to movements and motions

¹³ Chloe Anderson, Interview by Author, Telephone, September 23, 2019.

the way it used to, she had to redo, or recalibrate, calculations for movements such as the time it takes to move to the ball or jump in the air to hit it.

Christina is in her late forties and is a project manager at a home infusion therapy company. She played women's tackle football and characterizes her body's ability to recover in similar terms as Chloe:

I wasn't used to the effects that hormones would have on my body. And I mean I used to be like Wolverine, you know, from the X-men. Like I could like endure just about anything and my body would recover like overnight. And um, I didn't realize, but now my body had become very fragile and I would do the explosive movement. Like I had to be much more careful with my body and sure enough at one of the tryout events I pulled my quad muscle. But I still did pretty good.¹⁴

During practices and games, Christina realized that the "fragility" of her body could not accommodate the kinds of explosive movements that she was able to endure pre-HRT. Similar to Chloe, Christina experienced a longer recovery period after training or competing.

My interviewees descriptions of their bodies suggests that they do not benefit as much from the bodies that they had pre-HRT. If lowering their testosterone had these noticeable effects, doesn't this suggest that testosterone is the substance that can ostensibly give them an edge? To avoid any misapprehension about the effects of testosterone on athletic performance, I first want to contextualize their descriptions in a brief review of how testosterone researchers and scholars in feminist science studies have approached this question. In other words, before I analyze the social and political implications of their responses, which is the primary purpose of my project, I will summarize what *clinical* data say based on how scholars have already surveyed these studies.

¹⁴ Christina Gunther, Interview by Author, Telephone, July 26, 2019.

Setting the Record Straight: Clinical Data on Testosterone and Athleticism

On the surface, how my interviewees describe the effects of androgen-blockers and/or estrogen might suggest that without testosterone, they cannot lift as much, they do not recover as quickly, and that they must work harder than they used to just to *maintain* their bodily capability, let alone increase it. If the inverse can be assumed, then is testosterone *the* single, most important piece that gives anyone with elevated (or exposure to elevated) levels of testosterone an advantage when it comes to competition? There is not a widely accepted answer among testosterone researchers. To paint a picture of how complicated this question is, I again draw on Katrina Karkazis's and Rebecca Jordan-Young's *Testosterone: An Unauthorized Biography*, where they deconstruct several of the myths associated with testosterone such as higher levels of violence, risk-taking, feelings of power, and athleticism.¹⁵

Simply put, studies do not yield consistent results that demonstrate a relationship between testosterone and athletic performance. In their analysis of studies of testosterone and athletic performance, Karkazis and Jordan-Young concluded that some studies show a clear connection between endogenous testosterone and speed or explosive power, some studies show weak or no connections, and some studies found a negative relation between endogenous testosterone and athletic performance.¹⁶ Still other studies showed that

¹⁵ Both Karkazis and Jordan-Young, in addition to other scholars with whom they have collaborated, have published several articles, many of which I cite in this dissertation, that relay much of this information. For concision, I draw on data in their monograph *Testosterone*.

¹⁶ *Testosterone*, 161.

testosterone is connected to performance only for specific athletes such as those who play certain positions in American football or rugby, or athletes who have a higher baseline strength. Even the word “strength” is not a universal characteristic, according to the American Council on Exercise, which designates seven different types of strength: endurance, speed, maximum, explosive, agile, relative, and starting.¹⁷ Studies that examine testosterone and endurance and speed (only two strength types) do not show a conclusive relationship.¹⁸ The list of variables and contingencies in testosterone research and sports “yields surprisingly little in the way of conclusive evidence about what T does, instead showing a potentially frustrating collection of highly specific facts that seem to resist synthesis.”¹⁹ What *is* generally agreed upon is that on average and at a group level, men have higher testosterone levels than women.²⁰ That is, cis men and cis women.

To be clear, the testosterone research that Karkazis and Jordan-Young survey has been conducted on *cisgender* participants. The amount of data on testosterone in transwomen athletes is not only relatively miniscule but also inconclusive for reasons that I just described: what exactly do we mean by athletic performance? Does testosterone affect all athletes across the board? How is the body (and athletic performance) affected if endogenous testosterone dramatically decreases, like in Lirael’s case, who went from 680 pre-HRT to 12? According to Dr. Faryal Mirza, an endocrinologist at the University of Connecticut, someone who has experienced puberty with very high testosterone levels has become accustomed to

¹⁷ *Testosterone*, 164.

¹⁸ *Testosterone*, 164-165.

¹⁹ *Testosterone*, 179.

²⁰ *Testosterone*, 185.

these high levels, and lower levels may lead to deficient performance. This runs counter to claims that even with lower testosterone, transwomen retain an advantage from their testosterone exposure during puberty. For Mirza, “it’s not the fact that T is low, it’s the fact that T dramatically dropped from those individuals’ previous hormonal environment.”²¹

What we do know about the eleven women I interviewed is this: They often cannot lift as much weight, their bodies are more prone to injury, they take more time to recover, and they do not have as much energy and endurance in any given competition or training session as they used to. And still, they continue to be trans and they continue to be athletes. Of course, GCFs and other opponents of trans refute this and argue that relative to their previous potential, transwomen still retain some sort of advantage compared to cis women.²² This point is now more often made than simply, “their testosterone gives them an unfair advantage.” Currently, arguments that transwomen athletes have an unfair advantage generally take the form of “their testosterone exposure during puberty, regardless of what their T levels are now, have caused irreversible physical changes.” But this has yet to be proven and what Dr. Mirza said about the dramatic change in person’s hormonal environment actually suggests the opposite. What *is* evident is that despite their bodily changes, they train and play anyway. In the next section I argue that transwomen’s *transness*, specifically their identity as *women*, is affirmed through their athletic practice.

²¹ *Testosterone*, 191.

²² For the case made that transwomen have an osteological advantage, see Sutherland MA , Wassersug RJ , Rosenberg KR “From transsexuals to transhumans in elite athletics: The implications of osteology (and other issues) in leveling the playing field” in *Transgender Athletes in Competitive Sport*, ed by Travers and Anderson.

Why they do their sport

As I started conducting interviews, I was simultaneously analyzing GCF discourse and tracking state legislation that would effectively ban trans people from participating in public life. I added a question to my interview protocol that I subsequently asked interviewees: Why do you train for and play your sport despite increasing (negative) public attention to this topic and what seems to be increasingly hostile environments for transpeople in sports? In other words, what I wanted to know was why their sport continued to play a vital part of their lives even though sports, and its various cultural stakeholders, disavow their identity as women? In one sense, their responses were unremarkable in that they participate in sports for virtually the same reasons that cis people do: the social aspect, the competitive outlet, an increase in endorphins, the feeling of pushing one's body to its limits, and a kind of healing that can occur while directing energy toward one's body. This is in line with what many trans advocates²³ and medical care professionals²⁴ have maintained all along.

But two additional themes emerged that are quite remarkable given the overwhelmingly negative tenor of public conversations regarding transwomen in sports: that sports are also an outlet to explore and even *affirm* their gender and the active support of those within their sport networks. In this section I first discuss those responses that are similar to why non-trans athletes train and play sports. I then discuss how my interviewees find gender-affirming pleasures, joys, and comforts in sport.

²³ ACLU, "The Coordinated Attack on Trans Student Athletes."

²⁴ "Brief of Amici Curiae American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association, and 10 additional Health Care Organizations in Support of Appellees."

“I’m out here to have fun, act like I’m not fat, and be like Al Bundy”

Kate practices and competes in downhill mountain biking, which is a type of mountain biking where riders travel down steep and rough terrain as fast as possible.

Competing against her best numbers is what appeals to practicing and training for her sport:

I’m a very competitive person, so I think it’s always the sense of going and training and getting better. And I think that, you know, it’s going in the gym and you’re lifting a weight that’s a bit heavier or, you know, doing an interval session on the bike and being able to do more power you know, in that sense of constant improvement. I get a bit of a dopamine rush from, you know, making myself nearly vomit in training.

Veronica, who is an elite track cyclist, also details a similar experience of an exercise-induced rush to the point of syncope. When I asked her to describe the joy she gets from cycling, she remembers two particular training sessions:

the first time I did this workout I had to stop in the second of four intervals because I was panicking about not being able to breathe, like I was going to pass out. I’m not breathing fast enough... And the second time I did it, um, I basically almost fell off the bike just getting off it. And I was ordered to do it inside because [the competition was inside]. So there’ve been times I’ve trained and actually almost blacked out [because of] how hard I went and like there’s something, I wouldn’t say pleasurable about that, but you can be proud that you’re able to do that and most people can’t. So that’s a source of joy.²⁵

Christina also likes to push herself to do better when it comes to training, and roots this in being very competitive. Although she “did have some athleticism” as a kid, she did not particularly like playing sports because she was very uncomfortable with her body. At an all-boys military Catholic school, she was bullied and as she puts it, “I also had a mouth on me too. I’m this kind of daddy’s girl princess in a boy’s body, so I was just asking to get beaten.” Christina asked her parents if she could take karate lessons to learn how to defend

²⁵ Veronica Ivy, Interview by Author, Telephone, May 19, 2019.

herself, and eventually she became a second-degree black belt. After running four marathons she started playing women's tackle football. Christina hones in on why she likes training: "There's the empowerment, there's the mental and psychological benefits of being physically fit. Martial arts help with self-esteem, but there's also this very, very competitive—I'm a very competitive individual. I like to push myself to do a little bit better. I like to push myself to the limits."

Jamie sees competition in slow-pitch softball as a way to perfect the small details:

There's still specific plays in specific at bats from last year that I'm angry about this year... And so I think it's just about having something to be working towards and working on and [be] competitive in and trying to refine and tweak and perfect, that keeps me coming back because you can have a great game but if you make one mistake, you're like, "Fuck, if I had only done this, I would've been fine."

Several interviewees also expressed their fondness for the social aspect of sports. In Jamie's case, playing slow-pitch softball locally and nationally allows her to "have fun, to act like I'm not fat, to be kind of be Al Bundy²⁶, like three, four touch downs in the game. Like, that's all, I just want to go and do some cool stuff with my friends and have stories to tell for the next week." Chloe reminisces about her time playing volleyball at a community college and a Division 2 university: "for me at least the teamwork involved was also really rewarding. It felt nice." Similarly, for Athena, who played soccer at the same university as Chloe and now plays on the US beach handball national team, sports allow her "to be part of a group and be part of something."²⁷ I think for me, growing up I had a lot of trouble fitting in

²⁶ Al Bundy is one of the main fictional characters in the television series *Married... with Children*. The highlight of Bundy's life is that he scored four touchdowns in his high school's city championship football game.

²⁷ Athena del Rosario, Interview by Author, Telephone, July 12, 2019.

making friends, things like that. And sports was always the place for me to go to be able to do that. And it still is today.” The social aspect of sports for my interviewees confirms what trans advocates as well as women’s sports advocates assert as the vital role athletic activity, whether individual or team, can play in a person’s support network.²⁸

On the one hand, that my interviewees described the social and team aspects of why they enjoy playing sports is not surprising. These are also reasons why cis people engage in sports. But on the other hand, it is remarkable because of circulating discourse that suggests that trans people, transwomen in particular, often struggle to experience sports as a supportive outlet. The growing and pervasive amount of backlash from GCFs alone would make it seem like transwomen already playing sport (or who might be considering joining a team) are all but guaranteed to be involved in controversy. Moreover, my review of academic literature on trans experiences would suggest that enjoyable moments—let alone *sustained* aspects—I would hear from my interviewees would be few and far between. This was not the case.

Sport as a Gender-Affirming Praxis

At first glance, what I also found to be unexpected was how participating in their sport became a mechanism to explore, refine, and affirm their gender identity and expression.²⁹ But upon closer analysis it made sense that as they sought modes of gender

²⁸ Women’s Sports Foundation, “Chasing Equity: The Triumphs, Challenges and Opportunities in Sports for Girls and Women.”

²⁹ I use “identity” to denote the gender that they align themselves with and “expression” to denote how they communicate their gendered sense of self with others. The relationship and distinction between these two terms becomes clear in the rest of this chapter, particularly with Kate’s story.

affirmation—such as identifying as women to others and starting hormone replacement therapy—their athletic training concomitantly, or perhaps *in addition*, became a gender-affirming outlet.

Mary, who had not played any sports before starting powerlifting when she was forty years old, initially lifted weights because she was “morbidly obese” and after signing up for a competition to stay motivated, she “fell in love with it.” She eventually lost ninety pounds and as she:

“started feeling better physically, I started to, you know, question my mental health and that's when I started to really look for answers. So, strength training actually kind of led to me finding, you know, the answer to the puzzle that I was trans.”

Mary also explained that after being out to her now ex-wife for a year, she started attending a support group for transwomen. But after a while,

I kind of pulled away from that a little bit just because I sometimes feel like I don't completely fit in because, because I'm so outspoken or because I had to be outspoken about powerlifting and strength, that's kind of, there's still a stigma attached to women lifting weights and being strong. And sometimes I feel like I don't completely fit in the trans community because they're like, well, how can you be trans? And, you know...yet you're doing this very male thing.

I asked her how she felt about doing an ostensibly masculine sport and she explains that she struggles with periodic dysphoria that accompanies her powerlifting:

I mean, I've got some muscles and, you know, I'm like, that's not feminine. And sometimes I wish I was, you know, 120 pounds and five foot three instead of five foot eight, 180 pounds... [and] then you start playing the feedback loop in your mind where it's like, “Well, it doesn't matter what I do, because everybody's just going to think the only reason I'm doing this is because I was born or assigned male at birth” or, you know, it's, “So what does it matter and why am I doing this? Why am I putting myself through this?” And I have that happens sometimes, but I kind of just have to take a moment and step back and get some perspective. And I follow a lot of women,

you know, a lot of female strength athletes, particularly powerlifters. And I draw a lot of inspiration from them... And there've been guys that have come on [social media] and trashed them for, being so strong, you know, “You got to be on drugs” or something to disparage their lift or “The only reason you're able to bench that much is because of your arch” so you know, I have to look at the perspective of it doesn't matter that I'm trans. Any time, any kind of female tries to step out of the typical female mold that society wants you're going to get some kickback and you're going to get some flack and that's kind of—I have to always work hard at keeping that perspective.

Here Mary explains that she finds a sense of solidarity with and draws inspiration from other women powerlifters because they are also subject to sexist ridicule. She identifies with other women strength athletes because of how they break from the “typical female mold,” meaning they have well-developed muscles and can lift a substantial amount of weight—a feat that is neither in association with nor expected from normative femininity. Women often post their training sessions on social media and subsequently become targets of sexism that belittles their work. Mary, who has been subject to both online and in-person harassment, identifies with this form of sexist disparagement. This was hardly what I anticipated since Mary’s lifting numbers, as well as her dead name, were used in Kristopher Hunt’s presentation about USA Powerlifting’s ban against trans athletes. In addition, she was stripped of her medals at a competition with a different federation because she is trans. Despite these traumatic experiences, Mary still looks to other woman in powerlifting—both cis and trans—as sources of empowerment. Moreover, she embraces the athletic femininity that she sees in other women powerlifters, such as large muscles and the aspiration to increase the amount of weight she can carry, two aspects that are commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity.

Kate also explains the process through which she navigated becoming at peace with her current expression of athletic femininity. When she first started HRT, she envisioned

embodying what she calls “traditional femininity.” Kate also states that her expectation was informed by what tends to be culturally assumed of transwomen, where

There's this expectation of femininity, you know, it's this classic someone comes out and then as soon as they come out it's dresses and makeup and, you know, bras and underwear and there's this sort of, there's this expectation of, you come in and that's it you are feminine.

Here Kate describes the limited scope of gender expression that transwomen are expected to embody according to the popular imaginary. She describes how she navigated this expectation while grappling with her personal gender expression. Like Mary, Kate also finds comfort in knowing that other women cyclists express a similar kind of femininity:

And I think that that outcome [she expected of herself] was very traditionally feminine and it was always that expectation, that goal was always a little bit opposed to, you know, what I loved because I love competing. I love going to the gym and love training. You know, I love that kind of thing. And all of those things are kind of roadblocks to being traditionally feminine...I think that being surrounded by other women who are a lot like me who look like me, who aren't traditionally feminine, has been really affirming and has made me, sort of, I guess, find a new love of being in the gym and training and everything. And you're realizing that it's okay if I have tiny boobs and abs because that's what everyone around me is like and that's also helped [me] sort of rediscover myself and being okay with how I am, even though it's not what I expected. I think being a high-level athlete has been an important part of that process because, it's sort of you look at the weightlifters and stuff, but none of them are traditionally feminine people. And I think that my own transition has sort of been affirmed a lot because of that reflection on myself.

Both Kate and Mary ultimately embrace the athletic femininity that they have identified in their cycling and powerlifting circles, respectively. What we learn through their experience is that their expression of athletic femininity shapes and is shaped by their peers who, like them, diverge from the “typical female mold” by developing large muscles, having “tiny boobs,” and visible abs.

What might we learn from these women’s experiences developing their athletic practice not despite, but *as a result* of their gender identities that GCFs, conservatives, and other anti-trans constituents routinely repudiate? The women I interviewed physically and mentally benefit from their athletic training and competition. To be clear, by “physical benefits” I do not mean the narrow and pervasive version of “health” that mainstream fitness culture and the medical industrial complex have commodified. What I do mean is a version of health and fitness that Ilya Parker at Decolonizing Fitness instills in their practice: “that movement can be used as a healing modality for some of our most marginalized populations.”³⁰ For Parker, this also means engaging in forms of movement that are validating to one’s body.

In the first part of this chapter, I explored how my interviewees described the effects of hormone replacement therapy on their bodies. Much of scientific literature offers numerical values that quantify changes in muscle mass, testosterone levels, and fat distribution, disassociated from the bodies that these numerations describe. While there is an abundance of ostensibly objective data, most of which does not provide conclusive results, my goal was to ask my interviewees, “how do the effects of HRT *feel*?” Anticipating dramatic effects on their athletic performance, the remainder of this chapter sought to illuminate why these athletes continue to train and compete despite hostility *and* the effects of HRT?

GCFs perpetually advance a concept of sex that is “biological”: it is rooted in chromosomes, reproductive organs, and hormone levels. In other words, sex is

³⁰ Parker, “What Does Decolonizing Fitness Mean?”

immutable and gender is a social construct that is based in ideology. With this operational notion of sex, GCFs stymie an expansive notion of women's sports—and perhaps sports more broadly—that is not simply trans-affirming but women-affirming. That is, a *transfeminist* notion of sports.

Epilogue

Throughout this dissertation I have asserted various iterations of statements such as “scientific studies have yet to prove this,” or “there is not a scientific consensus about the effects of testosterone.” In this epilogue, I want to clarify what might be misinterpreted as a deference to “scientific” studies as having the last word on appropriate criteria and conditions for trans people to be able to participate in organized sports. I elaborate on this clarification to also comment on the field of trans studies more broadly through what I see as the relevance—and urgency—of sports as a critical site of inquiry.

In the preceding chapters, I contested the grounds of ineligibility for trans folks in sports by drawing on scholarship in feminist science studies. For example, in chapter 3, I critiqued the citation and deployment of various scientific studies in a USAPL presentation that sought to prove that transwomen powerlifters have an unfair advantage and are therefore prohibited from competing in its federation. In chapter 4, I paused to briefly summarize the complicated and conflicting research that Katrina Karkazis and Rebecca Jordan-Young analyzed to reiterate that testosterone (and its supposed associated benefits) does not definitively yield an advantage for transwomen athletes. My simultaneous leveraging of science and critique of Science suggests a critical conversation between feminist science studies and trans studies insofar as queer and trans bodies are pathologized and discursively dissected in sports. Following Subramaniam and Willey, I use “Science” to denote “knowledge that is produced through the legitimizing apparatus of various institutions,

approved by reviewers and published (or legitimated by patents).”¹ Likewise, science—with a small s—signals forms of knowledge production that are certainly scientific and contribute to understanding our worlds but are not legitimated by Scientific powers that be.

Transfeminist sports studies integrates the vast array of critical tools developed by feminist sports, feminist science, and trans studies to hold both a discursive and materialist account of how athletic bodies shape and are shaped by social categories. Cultural studies scholars are well aware of the oft-cited dismissal of our work as merely social constructionist when, to be sure, analyses of race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, and other axes of power have significant material consequences. Subramaniam and Willey warn that “if the destabilization of said categories is too often reduced to the social, then the re/turn to ‘biology’ is far too often a return to these categories.”² This is precisely the case, as I demonstrated in chapter 2, when GCFs reduce trans people in sports as flippantly declaring a gender, taking hormones, and playing dress-up: only “real” women (i.e. people assigned female, have uteruses, ovaries, etc.), they proclaim, are allowed in women’s sports. But this “merely discursive” argument also circulates in sports studies, exemplified in prelude II of chapter 2, particularly when poststructuralism and queer theoretical engagements are trivialized as “playfully subversive,” a “dangerous idealism that ignores material, structural relations,” and an “overemphasis on the causal importance of language.”³

¹ Subramaniam and Willey, “Science Out of Feminist Theory Part One: Feminism’s Sciences,” 10.

² Subramaniam and Willey, 8-9.

³ Messner in Davidson and Shogan, 360-362.

And once again, as Subramaniam and Willey warn, a return to Biology indeed. Authorized by its epistemic colonialism, Western Science has and continues to disqualify black and brown bodies in sports, most recently in the 2020 Olympic Games. In addition to Caster Semenya, Namibian runners Christine Mboma and Beatrice Maslingi were excluded from running in the 400-meters event because their testosterone levels are deemed too high by World Athletics. The International Swimming Federation banned Soul Cap, a swimming cap designed for afro-textured hair, because it does not “fit the natural form of the head.”⁴ Meanwhile, contrary to what GCFs claim, trans people are not staging a mass infiltration of women’s sports but are participating in the 2020 Olympics for the *first* time.⁵ Absent among these trans Olympians, of course, are those who were deemed ineligible because of the IOC’s transgender policies.⁶

The surveillance and exclusion of several women athletes at the Olympic Games and other high-profile athletic events is because their testosterone levels are considered to be beyond what is considered “normal” for a woman. Elevated levels of testosterone are often part of what Western medicine classifies as intersex conditions. An indispensable site of inquiry that has generated my thinking about transfeminist sports studies is intersex analyses informed by queer and feminist theoretical frameworks.⁷ Specifically, David A. Rubin’s

⁴ Elan, “Swimming Caps for Natural Black Hair Ruled out of Olympic Games”; Nast, “The Olympics Continues to Prevent Top Black Athletes From Competing.”

⁵ Those who are openly trans are Canadian Soccer player Quinn, New Zealander weightlifter Laurel Hubbard, and American BMX freestyle alternate Chelsea Wolfe.

⁶ Most notably is Jamaican-American runner CeCe Telfúr.

⁷ For example, see Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*; Rubin, *Intersex Matters*; and Karkazis, *Fixing Sex*.

“Intersectionality and Intersex in Transnational Times” traces the ways in which westocentric sexual dimorphism pervades intersex medical management in globally uneven ways.⁸

Reading Semenya’s story, Rubin argues that athletic officials, activists, and scholars preemptively interpolate Semenya and other athletes as intersex even though she is a woman and has not identified as intersex. I, myself, have been guilty of calling Semenya intersex—as this is the category in which the IOC and medical authorities have situated her. After reading Rubin and other scholars in intersex studies, it is my hope to dislodge while also actively interrogating the biomedical frames that render queer and trans athletic bodies as entities to be fixed.

⁸ Rubin, *Intersex Matters*.

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