

Gender transformation in sport



Transgender athlete Lia Thomas

The decision for an athlete to undergo a gender transition is a profound change that affects the whole of their lives, both as human beings and as athletes. Gender transition is often a necessary step for their well-being, but it often leads to a number of barriers in the world of competitive sport.

■ The issue of athletic performances

The main problem concerning trans-gender athletes is the potential impact of this transition on athletic performance and its fairness. For trans women, the reduction in testosterone after hormone therapy leads to a decrease in strength and aerobic capacity, often requiring them to modify their entire training routines and expectations. For trans men, on the other hand, testosterone can increase these factors, raising questions on the fairness of competitions with other non-transgender male athletes, despite most scientific data report these claims to be unfounded.

■ Institutional and regulatory barriers

Transgender athletes experience difficulties concerning the rules established by international and national governing bodies and sports federations.

For example, in November 2021, the IOC decided to avoid applying restrictive rules, such as measuring hormone levels, but shifting the responsibility to establish specific rules to the individual sports federations. The IOC has also released some guiding principles which emphasise inclusion, non-discrimination, and fairness. The IOC states that each sport's governing body must determine how a disproportionate advantage, due to transition, must be assessed, based on the specific nature of their sport, for example strength-based or skill-based.

On the other hand, World Athletics, the governing body for track and field, has established very restrictive rules for transgender athletes' competitions, which have been effective since 2023. In particular, while transgender men (female becoming male after transition) can compete in the men's category without restriction, transgender women, on the contrary, are banned from competing in female World Ranking events if they were male during puberty, regardless of testosterone levels. The reasons for this rule are the advantages given by male puberty, a stronger bone structure and bigger lung capacity, which is considered too big to be reduced only by testosterone suppression, thus compromising the fairness of the female category.

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Answer the questions.

1. What is the main problem concerning transgender athletes?
2. What are the consequences of hormone therapy for trans women?
3. What do they have to do then?
4. What are the consequences of hormone therapy for trans men?
5. Are the concerns about fairness in competitions scientifically supported?
6. What did IOC decide for transgender athletes in November 2021?
7. Who has the responsibility of setting rules on the matter?
8. What do the IOC guiding principles concern?
9. When did the World Athletics restrictive rules become effective?
10. What is the rule for transgender men?
11. What is the rule for transgender women?
12. What are the reasons for this rule?