

The Fencing Coach

Hit Other Guy Before Other Guy Hits You

≡ Menu

On Trans Inclusion in Fencing

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Introduction

This is a difficult piece to write. I've wanted to talk about it for years, as I've found that when it's [brought up on my anonymous messaging platform](#), the answers I give fail to capture the nuance and depth that the topic requires. I've avoided writing about it, because it's something that's often discussed in bad faith and with anecdotal platitudes from anti-trans proponents, and selective, cherry-picked facts from allies. I suspect, even after reading this, people might only read the pieces that fit their narrative, not click on any of the 16 articles, studies, and testimonies I've cited within, and it's highly unlikely to sway the debate on what's an oddly divisive topic.

It's tough to discuss, because it's evolving. It's changing, and like wet cement it isn't settled and final as anyone makes it out to be—a sentiment shared by leading experts on the subject like Dr. Joanne Harper who questioned the International Olympic Committee (IOC)'s guidance and the “substance” of their policy.

So perhaps, before you dive in, it's best to call out my beliefs up front before you waste your time reading this and find yourself throwing up your hands in a tizzy.

- Transgender women are women and gender is not sex.
- Transgender fencers deserve the right to compete with the gender they identify with, and those of adult age should comply with the competition guidelines and regulations outlined by USA Fencing and the IOC—even if the science those IOC guidelines *might* be imperfect.
- A separate division denies them their truth to compete as their authentic selves and is antithetical to USA Fencing's Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) vision.
- There is a possibility that transgender women have a physical advantage over their cisgender opponents after transitioning. There is also a possibility they do not. In Fencing, there is no data to support either viewpoint.

- Giving athletes a sense of belonging and a will to live is more powerful than medals and competitive glory.

Giraldo, Rhonda, and the Mental Health and Well- Being of Trans Individuals

What is the purpose of sport? Sports give us a sense of community. They give us a sense of belonging. And through the struggle of training and competition we become stronger off the field of play. No story illustrates that to me more than the story of a former teammate of mine.

Shortly after I finished college, I was at a local club with a young man who we'll call "Giraldo." Giraldo was kind, hardworking, and hellbent on being a good fencer, but you could tell in any interaction with him he was timid and insecure. He spoke softly, struggled to maintain eye contact, and often sauntered around the club like a college freshman who was lost and late for class but too scared of his own shadow to ask for directions.

When Giraldo graduated and went off to college, I began to hear stories about him acting out, not playing nice with teammates, and drinking to excess. "You're talking about *Giraldo*?" I would ask. "Little soft spoken Giraldo?" I couldn't believe we were talking

about the same person, but I had heard about his transgressions from enough people that I was genuinely concerned for the young man's wellness.

Around sophomore year, Giraldo posted on Instagram that she was no longer Giraldo. She was now calling herself "Rhonda" and identified as a woman. Rhonda came home from school with newfound confidence, pep in her step, and the timidity I once associated her with was gone. She wasn't a boy afraid of his own shadow anymore, but a confident, strong young woman who suddenly was who she was always meant to be. She was her authentic self.

Giraldo wasn't timid and insecure because he was shy. He wasn't acting out in school and in Fencing out of pure malice. It turns out that Giraldo was acting this way because he was living the life of someone he wasn't, and as *any of us know too well*, we're all inclined to act a fool when we lie to ourselves. The moment he became Rhonda, the lie was gone and she was...happy.

Rhonda is one of the 1% of the adult population that identifies as transgender[1]. The trans existence can often be one of suffering. According to *Suicidality Among Transgender Youth: Elucidating the Role of Interpersonal Risk Factors*, "82% of transgender individuals have considered killing themselves, and 40% have attempted suicide, with suicidality highest among transgender youth.[2]" Not only is this community at risk to harm themselves, but they are over four times more likely than cisgender people to be victims of violent crime[3]. 27% feel unsafe at or going to or from school, and 35% are bullied at school[4].

Participation in sports for LGBTQ youth can be lifesaving. A 2022 study from Psychology in the Schools titled "Team sports participation, depression, and suicidal ideation in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning adolescents" found that transgender athletes are "less likely to report depression or suicidal thoughts" than heterosexual and cisgender adolescents.[5] Despite these benefits, 22 state legislatures have banned transgender participation in sport and sought to bar these at-risk youths from the field of play. **And to me, such bans are just as insidious as bans of cisgender woman.**

I'll be the first to admit that maybe ten years ago, I didn't understand this topic. I would have told you that gender was binary. I would have said: you're born a man or a woman

and your sex at birth is what you are. The science on the topic has evolved, and the science on the topic is still evolving. I'm not a doctor nor am I a medical expert, and I would suspect that most of my readers aren't either. But because this conversation often devolves to presentation of anecdotal evidence (Hello Lia Thomas) and non-sequiturs, let's have a look at what leading health organizations say about the complexity of the gender spectrum.

Following the Science: What is the Gender Spectrum?

Sex does not equal gender. Gender is your identity and how you define yourself. *Sex* on the other hand refers to the hormones, genitals, and chromosomes you're born with. The conversation on the topic rarely gets off the ground mostly because the naysayers consider these things one and the same. It's important to recognize that leading health organizations, including the American Psychological Association (APA), the United Nations Health Agency, and the World Health Organization (WHO) all back and understand the concept of a gender spectrum.

- In their publication *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Nonconforming People*, the American Psychological Association writes that “gender identity is defined as a person’s deeply felt, inherent sense of being a girl, woman, or female; a boy, a man, or male, a blend of male or female, or an alternative gender.” They recognize gender as a non-binary construct and stress that “a nonbinary understanding of gender is fundamental to the provision of affirmative care for [trans] people.[\[6\]](#)”

- In 2019, the United Nations Health Agency released a revised version of the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Edition (ICD-11) reclassifying “gender identity disorder” as “gender incongruence,” which is defined as “a marked and persistent incongruence between an individual’s experienced gender and the assigned sex, which often leads to a desire to ‘transition’, in order to live and be accepted as a person of the experienced gender, through hormonal treatment, surgery or other health care services to make the individual’s body align, as much as desired and to the extent possible, with the experienced gender.[7]”
- The World Health Organization (WHO) in their article on Gender and Health notes that “Gender interacts with but is different from sex, which refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs. Gender and sex are related to but different from gender identity. Gender identity refers to a person’s deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person’s physiology or designated sex at birth.[8]”
- Dr. Joanna Olson, the lead doctor in the Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles Transyouth Program suggests that while there is still much to be learned about what causes someone to be transgender, she states that the “...The information that is being discovered now is indicating that the neural wiring in a transgender person’s brain looks more similar to their gender of identity rather than their gender of assignment at birth.”

The overwhelming scientific sentiment on the gender spectrum is that it’s far more complex than male and female but there is still much to learn. But to deny the gender spectrum is to reject modern medicine, and if we can’t get past these facts, it’s hard to continue the conversation.

Why Trans Athletes Belong in Fencing, and Sport

The first principle of trans participation one must accept, is that *no one transitions with the intention of gaining a physical advantage over their cisgender peers*. To meet the adult requirements outlined in [USA Fencing's Transgender and Nonbinary Policy](#), athletes must go through rigorous testosterone suppression medication for a year and produce proof of compliant hormone therapy prior to competition. Such therapy can result in massive bodily changes and discomfort, fatigue, infertility, blood clots, and increased emotionality[9]. With or without a sex change, gender transitions are often tumultuous, especially when combined with the feelings of depression and suicide associated with being trans.

“When I first decided to transition,” one athlete named “Samantha” told me, “I didn’t even think about Fencing. I was in such a dark place and on the verge of offing myself that it was about survival for me. But when I was reborn, I picked up an epee and felt like I was holding it again for the first time.” When I asked her about being in the Fencing community, she told me: “Sometimes I get looks from my competitors. I get it, my voice doesn’t exactly sound feminine. But once they get over the initial shock, this community is very welcoming and treats me with respect for who I am. And that has made a huge difference in making me feel like I belong.”

For Bobbie Hirsch, the first transgender man to complete in NCAA Regionals, he found competing on the Men’s Team “liberating” and said “it finally feels like I belong.” This inclusive attitude was championed by Wayne State Fencing Coach Slava Zingerman, who

said “I don’t care what gender or race they are. They’re all my kids. The happier they are, the better results they’ll have.[\[10\]](#)”

Zingerman’s adopted a mentality that would benefit all coaches in Fencing—to love one’s students as one’s own children and allow them to be authentic in any gender they identify. That inclusive attitude is what makes our small community special and unlike any others, and allows athletes like Bobbie and Samantha to use sport for self-empowerment *and to simply live*, regardless of the results they get.

Questions of Athletic Superiority in Transgender Women

The science around trans athlete physiology is incomplete at best, but it would be disingenuous to not explore what’s out there. 13 studies have shown that transgender female athletes retain a physical advantage[\[11\]](#), while a number of additional studies question the link between physiology and athletic performance. Some key studies summarized and cited below:

- **Transwoman Elite Athletes: Their Extra Percentage Relative to Female Physiology**
 - Without gender segregation, female athletes would have little chance of winning in certain events. This study looked at men’s and women’s performances in the Rio Olympics in running, swimming, and canoe sprint and found that a women’s gold medal performance would not have qualified for the gold medal final in

men's in most of these events. In strength-related sports, world records can differ by 10-30% between males and females.

- Testosterone drives permanent sex differences that impact athletic performance in the brain, skeletal structure, and cardiorespiratory system. Testosterone impacts muscle mass, strength, and aerobic capacity as well.
- Even after meeting testosterone guidelines from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), “estrogen therapy will not reverse most athletic performance parameters...” and “transgender women will enter the female division with an inherent advantage because of their prior male physiology.[\[12\]](#)”
- **How does hormone transition in transgender women change body composition, muscle strength and hemoglobin? Systematic review with a focus on the implications for sport participation**
 - Hormone therapy decreases hemoglobin levels to those of cisgender women in as little as 4 months.
 - Muscle mass in the cross-sectional area and lean body mass remain higher than in cisgender women, even after 12-36 months.
 - “It is possible that transwomen competing in sports may retain strength advantages over cisgender women, even after 3 years of hormone therapy.[\[13\]](#)”
- In his 2020 expert testimony on transgender athletes, Dr. Joshua Safer, a doctor in endocrinology at Mount Sinai Hospital found that a person's genetic makeup and internal/external reproductive anatomy “are not useful indicators of athletic performance.[\[14\]](#)”

Inclusion Above All Else

We can acknowledge the following, we can begin to discuss what these things mean for USA Fencing's present and future:

- Gender is a complex spectrum
- Transgender female athletes *might* have a physical advantage over cisgender female athletes—even after meeting HRT guidelines prescribed by the IOC. They also *might* not.
- Trans athlete participation reduces feelings of suicide and depression
- There is no data on transgender performance in the sport of Fencing

Joanna Harper, one of the leading scientists on trans athletes found that left-handed fencers have advantages over right-handed athletes, where “40% of elite fencers are left-handed” compared to 10% of the population[15]. But Harper also notes that right-handed fencers can “engage in meaningful competition despite the advantages that left-handed fencers have.” Fencing, a sport often referred to as “physical chess” allows for strategy and tactics to neutralize advantages in any opponent, be they lefty, righty, trans, or cisgender.

Compared to other sports, technique is a great equalizer in Fencing, and while observationally and anecdotally, there might be some advantages that come with a being assigned a male at birth, without commissioned studies, it’s hard to reach that conclusion.

In the transgender debate, a suggestion is often made to create a separate division for transgender athletes. To do so, however, would be to deny an athlete their truth and force them to compete as someone they’re not, thereby being exclusionary in nature.

In our own sport’s vision for diversity and inclusion, USA Fencing writes that it “strives to increase the participation of all individuals regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, gender expression, age or disability.[16]” Upholding our values to be inclusive of all these groups means using our sport as a conduit for belonging and giving athletes like Rhonda and Samantha a purpose that supersedes material rewards like medals and points. It gives them a sense to live. It gives them a sense to thrive. And that is exactly what the purpose of the Olympic movement is.

One day, my daughter may compete against a transgender woman. She might win. She might lose. I hope I’ve done a good enough job articulating the depth of the issue, that she doesn’t care about the outcome and that both she and her opponent simply enjoyed the

bout. I hope she understands that the young lady she competed with might not be with us in this world if she was forced to live a lie in a gender she didn't identify with. And I hope, by the time my daughter is old enough to compete, this topic won't be as faux-pas and divisive as it is in the present.

[1] <https://usafacts.org/articles/what-percentage-of-the-us-population-is-transgender/>

[2] <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32345113/>

[3] <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/ncvs-trans-press-release/>

[4] <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6803a3.htm>

[5] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pits.22792>

[6] <https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf>

[7] <https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http%3a%2f%2fid.who.int%2fid%2fentity%2f90875286>

[8] https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1

[9] <https://2pass.clinic/en/article/6-main-body-changes-induced-by-mtf-hrt>

[10] <https://www.outsports.com/trans/2023/3/7/23624564/bobbie-hirsch-fence-wayne-state-transgender-men-ncaa-regional-tournament>

[11] <https://www.bbc.com/sport/61346517?zephhr-modal-register>

[12] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9331831/>

[13] <https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/bjsports/early/2021/02/28/bjsports-2020-103106.full.pdf>

[14] <https://www.self.com/story/trans-kids-in-sports-faq>

[15] <https://www.bbc.com/sport/61346517?zephhr-modal-register>