

Stephanie Turner's Opening Statement

DOGE Committee

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I started fencing at the University of Maryland college club team twelve years ago and became competitive within the United States Fencing Association, the USFA, a year later. What started as a hobby quickly became a deep passion of mine. In these past twelve years I estimate that I have spent over 7000 hours training and over \$100,000 between lessons, club dues, competition fees, equipment, and travel. I have dedicated a significant portion of my life to this sport and competition because, like thousands of other women, I love it.

My favorite part of fencing is the competition: the thrill, the fight, the triumph, even the heartache. But lately, fair, female-only competition is harder and harder to come by. The USFA has over 200 self-declared members who identify as “transgender”. Each time a man competes in the women’s category, with USAF’s support, it removes fair sport and takes opportunities from women.

Fencing is a combat sport, a martial art of sorts. There are elements of speed, power, reaction time, distance control, footwork and blade work - all attributes affected by sex development. It’s not uncommon for a quicker, more athletic opponent to overcome the technique of another fencer. Athleticism is powerful in fencing and works in equal parts with strategy and technique. It’s unbelievably demeaning to female fencers to put down the differences between men and women and any woman’s loss to a man as a “skill issue” or that a woman simply needs to work harder.

Within the USFA authoritative body, there is a culture of intimidation toward women which demands that we be silent when men enter our tournaments. A culture that includes public humiliation, doxxing, social ostracism, dismissal, and even threats. I went from avoiding tournaments with known male athletes to reaching out to news outlets to get this story known. The USFA up until my protest has been unresponsive to women’s demands for fair fencing and instead doubled down on efforts to promote male inclusion in the female category.

One month ago, I took a knee in protest to a man competing in my category, Division 1A Women’s Foil—ironically held at the University of Maryland, where my fencing career began—and the video of my protest went viral. The story of that knee began three years ago when I contacted ICONS out of desperation over numerous men taking women’s national and world titles. Leadership was not only ignoring women, but encouraging and glorifying these men. It felt like there was no place for women in USFA fencing. It took me nearly three years to get up the courage to take a knee at the Cherry Blossom Open. That knee I took in protest was a cry for help and an act of desperation.

The night before the tournament, I saw Redmond Sullivan's name on the registration list. I recognized his name from a Reduxx article as a male fencer on Wagner College's men team who switched to the women's NCAA team and the women's USFA division. I cried the whole night and again felt betrayed by the USFA. I had already spent the money on competition fees and new equipment, spent hours training and refurbishing my equipment, and had traveled down from Philadelphia, PA to College Park, MD the night before in preparation for that tournament. I felt trapped. I had been defrauded of a women's tournament and sold a lie by the USFA.

This was hardly the first time I faced fencing a man in a woman's competition. In previous instances, I would wait until the last minute to register for a tournament to see if any known men would register. If they did, I would not sign up. I missed out on numerous regional and national tournaments. I did not want to keep abandoning opportunities to advance my fencing. I had felt so isolated and strangled by the USFA for disagreeing with its transgender policy that I felt scared to speak openly online or with friends in the fencing community. I reached out to a church friend asking what I should do. We prayed together and asked God, if it is His will that I protest, that He pair me with Redmond in a bout the following day. The next morning, I found myself on the platform against him, and stood down.

Speaking out on this issue has made me a target for harassment and violence, as well as cost me friends. I have decided to step away from the sport I love, at least for now as well because the USFA has fostered an environment where I am unwelcome in my own category. It is culturally acceptable to bully and shame women who speak up for women. I should not have had to make this sacrifice. Women deserve to be treated fairly in sport. We deserve opportunities to train, compete and win in a women's category set aside for women. We deserve this at the lowest levels of sport all the way through elite Olympic competition. I hope that by taking a stand and raising awareness of the misogyny in our sport, I can help ensure other women and girls do not have to take such risks to receive the most basic protections in sports.