

Supporting Trans Student Athletes



REFERENCES

Introduction

The life of a student athlete can often be demanding as they juggle the immense pressure of varsity sports and academics. However, most 2SLGBTQIA+ athletes face additional challenges within post-secondary sports, such as harassment, violence and discrimination from their teammates, exclusion from competitions and risks of losing scholarships.^{1,2} This infosheet specifically focuses on trans* student athletes, who often have to navigate transphobia and scrutiny from fellow athletes, media and the larger society.

In this infosheet, we will be using the term “trans*” as an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from their gender assigned at birth. To learn more about the broader challenges trans* individuals face due to their identity, please refer to the **“Intersecting Identities and Additional Barriers”** section in CICMH’s **Invisible Intersections Toolkit on Supporting 2SLGBTQ+ Students on Campus**

There is an immense need for research to be done to investigate the inclusiveness and culture of post-secondary athletics within and beyond Ontario, the impact on trans* student athletes within these environments and best practices to support them. This information helps post-secondary institutions inform future policies, understand the gaps within their services and cultivate a psychologically and culturally safe environment for all students.



Attitudes Towards Trans* Student Athletes

- Transphobic attitudes that posit that trans* women in sports have an athletic advantage.^{3,4}
- A study found that coaches' negative attitudes towards college trans* athletes mostly stem from a disbelief in the authenticity of trans* identities and a misplaced concern for safeguarding the "integrity" of women's sports.⁵
- A recent thesis study conducted by the University of Alberta noted that cisgender female athletes viewed trans* athlete participation in women's sports as less favourable compared to cisgender male athletes due to reasons mentioned above.⁴
- Athletic trainers not being equipped or trained to care for trans* athletes.⁶ For example, not knowing how to counsel trans* athletes on mental health concerns or effects associated with hormones.
- Trans* individuals often have to jump through hoops and wait times to access necessary funding, documentation and paperwork for medical necessities, which can impact trans* athletes who need timely care.⁷
- Attitudes by athletic peers towards trans* athletes are greatly influenced by political leanings (specifically on trans* women in sports), as well as religiosity when it comes to overall trans* inclusion in sports.⁸

THE INTERPLAY OF RACE, GENDER AND TRANSPHOBIA

Colonial standards of femininity have done great harm to racialized athletes who do not fit those standards. Athletes like Serena Williams, Caster Semenya and most recently Imane Khelif and Lin Yu-Ting, are some of many that are impacted by the Eurocentric nature of sports. Black athletes are particularly affected, often experiencing scrutiny and harassment rooted in transphobia.¹⁰

Impact on Trans* Student Athletes

Trans* student athletes may experience various setbacks due to the transphobia they face, which can cause emotional, mental and physical harm. Such experiences can:

- Further discourage trans* students from pursuing sports.^{1,2}
- Negatively impact their sense of belonging within their teams or sport(s) in which they are participating.¹
- Impact their self-esteem due to the negative perceptions they experience from peers, coaches, school communities and wider society (media perceptions, social media, politicians, etc.).⁴
- Cause discomfort, embarrassment and concern over safety within locker rooms, especially if trans* student does not fit the gender binary.¹
- Not being able to pursue specific sports due to gender specific restrictions and/or most athlete services and culture adhering to gender binaries.¹
- Put trans* student athletes at high risk of depression, suicide, substance use and other mental health conditions.^{1,9}
- Put trans* student athletes at high risk of harassment and violence:
 - Likely seen in spaces like locker rooms where trans* students may feel vulnerable due to exposure of bodies and lack of cameras within those spaces.⁹
 - This can also occur if coaches or staff reveal a student's trans* identity without their permission.



Cultivating a Safe and Supportive Environment

Trans* students deserve respect and the opportunity to fully participate in sports safely and with dignity, as much as their cisgender peers. The responsibility to create such safety lies solely with the post-secondary institution and its relevant departments. Ways to create a culture of safety include:

Using a proactive approach to promote safe spaces for trans* student athletes by fostering inclusive language, healthy sport and locker room cultures, and moving away from gender binary ideologies.^{1,9,13}



Ex: Ensuring ways to maintain confidentiality for trans* identity using gender neutral language and respecting preferred pronouns.

Fostering team support intentionally towards trans* student athletes to increase team bonding and a sense of belonging.¹



Ex: Vocal and clear support of trans* student participation in sports within teams, including allyship training for teams.

Providing training for coaches, healthcare teams and administrators on trans* inclusion, showing leadership when promoting inclusion, and having open conversations with student athletes about gender and sexuality.^{1, 5, 13}



Ex: Training on inclusive language and microaggressions and conversations about **myths and facts surrounding trans athlete participation.**



Increasing 2SLGBTQIA+ diversity within athletic departments for role modeling, specifically trans* staff as their experiences differ from cisgender counterparts.¹¹

Enacting policies that are inclusive and do not tolerate anti-trans* or anti-2SLGBTQIA+ rhetoric schoolwide as well as specific to athletic departments.



Ensuring gender neutral washrooms and change rooms are available.



Having trans* student athlete-specific supports are available and accessible on campus.

Student athletics offers students a sense of belonging, purpose and positive post-secondary experience. This experience is further enhanced by the respect and acceptance of peers and coaches. Therefore, it is crucial for trans* students to have the opportunity to experience these benefits without barriers. Adopting an inclusive strategy within athletic departments not only benefits student athletes in terms of performance, but also the department performance as a whole and has no negative effect in doing so.¹¹ Additionally, inclusiveness and addressing transphobia provides a safe space for anyone who may not fit within the traditional concept of masculinity or femininity regardless of gender identity.^{2, 12}

RESOURCES

[Creating Inclusive Environments for Trans Participants in Canadian Sport](#)

[CICMH Student Athlete Mental Health Toolkit](#)

[CICMH Invisible Intersections: A Toolkit on Supporting 2SLGBTQ+ Students on Campus](#)

[Rainbow Health Ontario – Education and Training](#)

[Trans 101 Course](#)

[Gender Diversity: The Basics by Skipping Stone](#)

[Ouch – Send the Right Message \(Information on homophobia, biphobia and transphobia\)](#)

[Trans and Non-binary | The 519 Media Reference Guide](#)



Special thanks to Rainbow Health Ontario for their contribution to this infosheet.

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK!**

