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Report offers guidance for transgender student-athletes

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A report from the National Center on Lesbian Rights and the Women's Sports Foundation may give the NCAA some much anticipated guidance on how colleges and universities accommodate the interests of student-athletes who have transitioned or are transitioning from one gender to another.

The report stresses that any transgender student-athlete "should be allowed to participate in any gender-segregated sports activity so long as that athlete's use of hormone therapy, if any, is consistent with the national governing body's existing policies on banned medications."

It also specifies conditions under which both transgender athletes who are undergoing hormone treatment and those who aren't should be allowed to compete.

The report coincides with an ongoing review in the NCAA governance structure – particularly the Committee on Women's Athletics, the Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee, and the Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports – to develop Association-wide policies regarding transgender student-athlete participation in college sports.

Though the number of transgender student-athletes is unknown (the NCAA national office has received about 30 inquiries from the membership over the last two years), it is an issue that NCAA presidents, particularly in Division III, have asked to be prioritized. What is known, however, is that young students from elementary age through high school, with the support of their parents, are identifying as transgender and expecting to participate on athletics teams.

The report offers a comprehensive discussion of what the term "transgender" means and how to provide access and equal opportunities to the individuals it applies to.

Recommendations for transgender athletes undergoing hormone treatment:

- A male-to-female transgender student-athlete who is taking medically prescribed hormone treatment related to gender transition may participate on a men's team at any time but must complete one year of hormone treatment related to gender transition before competing on a women's team.
- A female-to-male transgender student-athlete who is taking medically prescribed testosterone related to gender transition may *not* participate on a women's team after beginning hormone treatment and must request a medical exception from the national governing body before competing on a men's team because testosterone is a banned substance.
- A female-to-male transgender student-athlete who is taking medically prescribed testosterone for the purposes of gender transition may compete on a men's team.
- In any case where a student-athlete is taking hormone treatment related to gender transition, that treatment must be monitored by a physician, and the NGB must receive regular reports about the athlete's eligibility according to these guidelines.

Recommendations for transgender athletes not undergoing hormone treatment:

- Any transgender student-athlete who is not taking hormone treatment related to gender transition may participate in sex-separated sports activities in

In 2005, a Bates College track and field student-athlete "came out" as transgender to the campus community and to fellow New England Small College Athletic Conference schools. The 11-time All-American thrower, who was born female, announced a preference to be referred to as male. The senior changed his name to Keelin Godsey (from Kelly) and requested that the male pronoun be used in casual conversation, as well in school press releases and publications, by professors, coaches and teammates.

Godsey went on to win the hammer throw at the 2005 and 2006 Division III Women's Outdoor Track and Field Championships.

Because Godsey had not undergone any surgical or hormonal treatment to complete the transformation from psychological transgender individual to physiological transsexual, he was allowed to continue to compete at the collegiate level on the women's team. Separate dressing accommodations were made for him, home and away, during the season.

Bates supported Godsey's decision to announce his feelings during his senior season. The college posted a statement from Godsey that said, "Bates is a comfortable environment where I have a decent amount of respect from students and faculty. I would rather transition my senior year – that is, change my name and pronouns – than transition while living in a new place, starting a job or two, beginning internships or

accordance with his or her assigned birth gender.
- A female-to-male transgender student-athlete who is not taking testosterone related to gender transition may participate on a men's or women's team.
- A male-to-female transgender student-athlete who is not taking hormone treatments related to gender transition may *not* compete on a women's team.

Experts agree that at its core, the transgender issue is no different from other diversity and inclusion matters since the priority is accommodating the well-being of the student-athlete. However, the challenge for any governing body creating policy is to maintain the integrity of women's sports but also provide an equitable opportunity for transgender student-athletes to participate, particularly transgender women (men who have transitioned to being women). The overriding issue is the effect of testosterone on the person in question.

The Division III Presidents Council, as well as the Divisions I, II and III Student-Athlete Advisory Committees and other governance groups that have reviewed this issue, are especially interested in accommodating the transgender student-athlete's interests as the top priority.

That resonates with Committee on Women's Athletics member and Smith College Athletics Director Lynn Oberbillig, who also chairs the Division III Management Council.

"We need to convince people to first button down the student-athlete well-being component of this before worrying about the equity piece," Oberbillig said. "If we find there is an equity concern, we can address that later on, but let's open the discussion by first making sure we are doing the right thing."

Current policies vary

The NCAA currently has no specific policy related to transgender student-athletes when it comes to competition. Rather, the Association recommends following the gender classification of student-athletes' state identification documents such as driver's licenses and voter registration, and relies on the institution's designation of that individual. While that is sufficient in some respects, the matter can become complicated because of the differences in identification documents among states.

Other organizations, such as the International Olympic Committee, require athletes to wait two years after sexual-reassignment surgery before returning to competition, due primarily to competitive-equity concerns.

NCAA members would prefer the Association adopt policies that best meet student-athlete's unique needs. The joint report from the NCLR and WSF may help, especially since its contributors are experts in the field and included NCAA representatives.

"So many diversity issues start with a misunderstanding of the facts and stereotypes that we are presented with from such an early age. Much of this is just working to get through all of that misinformation in order to understand the core issue, which is the equality of all people," said the NCLR's Director of the Sports Project Helen Carroll, who co-authored the report with Pat Griffin of the WSF.

The focus on education is also an approach the NCAA is embracing. The Committee on Women's Athletics and the Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee acknowledged during a joint session in September that the topic itself will be new to many NCAA member schools. The national office already has begun identifying educational resources that define terms, outline potential issues and offer best practices until a formal policy is created.

Oberbillig said the WSF/NCLR report is a great place for that policy discussion to start. "The report will be a fantastic tool," she said. "The recommendations there will be a starting point for the governance structure."

In addition to the preliminary review from the women's and minority committees, the NCAA's competitive-safeguards committee will continue its review of the issue at its next meeting in December.

"The challenge is to get people to see this first as a human issue – this is about students and their well-being," said Shannon Minter, legal director for the NCLR. "The

grad school. Why now? I've hid who I am for my entire life. It's hard to live what you see as a lie. Everyone knows this one person, but you don't even consider that one person to be you. Or, you feel like you're lying to every important person in your life because they don't know everything about you. I try to be as honest with everyone as I can, so it's especially hard (to live the lie)."

Godsey competed at the U.S. Olympic Trials in 2008 but came up short in his bid to make the women's team.

NCAA can help reframe the matter as a human issue – this isn't a scary thing but an issue that schools are increasingly going to be called on to deal with."

Breaking down the stereotypes

Minter added that when schools are prepared with a policy, or are willing to at least be educated, resolutions are easier. "Where that is not the case, though," he said, "it can end up being a negative experience for the student-athlete, and for the athletics department and the institution."

"We believe the recommendations in the report represent the best thinking to date," said Griffin, who has overseen educational efforts for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues in sports for the WSF. "That's not to say that problems would not arise if these recommendations were to be implemented – that's just the nature of these types of issues. But if people can use the guiding principles to work their way through those unforeseen dilemmas, at least their decisions will be made on the best information available and not on stereotypes about transgender people."

Those stereotypes, Griffin said, are set at an early age.

"People assume that when you are born and assigned a gender, then that's the way it is," she said. "The idea of transitioning to another gender is so foreign to most people that it makes it challenging to understand how it could even happen."

As with other gender-equity and diversity efforts the NCAA has addressed over time, the transgender issue will require a learning curve.

"Any time you are looking at policies that must be inclusive, fair and equitable to everyone on the team, implementation can be a challenge," said Carroll. "We tried to speak with knowledgeable people in all areas, including the transgender students themselves. We tried to hear everyone. The report started out as one big question: How do we do this?"

And it produced a number of answers.

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