

Trans Youth and Athletes Belong in Sports

Political attacks against trans athletes and their participation in sports have skyrocketed. According to their proponents, trans sports bans are about “fairness,” and are often described as separate from other efforts to restrict trans rights. But attacks on transgender participation in sports have never been about fairness. Or sports. It is critical to understand how attacks on trans athletes are connected to the broader anti-LGBTQ+ political agenda, what they are actually about (ideology, not science), how they harm all of us, and what our communities can do to avoid the traps set out in front of us.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT TRANS ATHLETES' PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

Scientific Research Does Not Support Trans Sports Bans

The majority of studies on trans athletes report inconclusive results or explicitly state they cannot justify bans. Research is often cherry-picked to support ideological positions, and the emphasis on testosterone as the primary factor in athleticism is flawed. Even studies cited by lawmakers acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between hormones and performance.

Trans Sports Bans Are Not About Fairness

The argument for banning trans athletes often claims to be about “fairness,” yet these bans are part of a broader agenda to push transgender people out of public life. States that enact these bans frequently go on to implement some of the most restrictive anti-trans laws, including bans on gender-affirming care, restrictions on identification documents, and limitations on LGBTQ+ representation in public spaces.

Trans Athletes Do Not Harm Women's Sports

There is no evidence that trans athletes have had a measurable impact on the success of cisgender athletes. Athletic ability varies greatly among individuals, and transgender status is not a determining factor in success. Trans athletes have been competing openly for decades, and women's sports have continued to thrive. Despite a surge in media coverage, lawmakers behind these bans struggle to cite actual cases of conflicts involving trans athletes in their states.

"Protecting Women's Sports" Is a Misleading Justification:

Trans women are women. When we say women, that includes all women. Feminism, when inclusive and intersectional, is good for everyone. If the goal were truly to protect women's sports, efforts would focus on addressing discrimination, unequal funding, pay inequities, lack of media coverage, limited sponsorships, higher rates of sexual harassment, and Title IX enforcement. Instead, the phrase "protecting women's sports" has been co-opted as a means to exclude transgender women and girls. Advocating for women's sports should mean pushing for greater opportunities, combating sexual assault, securing fair media coverage, and ensuring representation in leadership. Excluding trans women and girls does nothing to address these real issues.

HARMS OF TRANS SPORTS BANS

Trans-Exclusive Bans Harm Transgender Youth

While trans-inclusive policies have no negative impact on cisgender athletes, trans-exclusive bans create significant barriers for transgender youth. Transgender youth are already less likely to participate in sports than their cisgender peers due to policy restrictions and widespread bullying or harassment from teammates and coaches when they disclose their identity. The Human Rights Campaign found that LGBTQ+ youth athletes were significantly more likely than non-athletes to feel safe in their classrooms and less likely to experience feelings of depression or worthlessness. Those who previously played sports but stopped were the least likely to feel safe at school and the most likely to report poor mental health.

Sports Bans Have Negative Impacts at All Levels of Competition

Bans on trans athletes extend far beyond elite competitions, affecting everything from swimming to disc golf to chess, and policing the participation of children at all ages and levels.

Invasive Gender Policing Impacts All Women and Girls

Enforcement of these bans often imposes burdensome and/or invasive requirements, including traumatic and age-inappropriate medical exams to examine “internal or external genitalia”, expensive and extraordinary DNA testing, bloodwork for hormone levels, or other ill-conceived and unscientific ‘gender’ tests. In addition to transgender girls and intersex athletes being excluded, cisgender (non-transgender) girls in states with these bans have been accused of violating the bans because other players or their parents believed they were too talented, too strong, or too tall to be girls — and the harassment they have faced has in some cases made it impossible to continue to play. An overwhelming number of women’s rights and gender justice organizations recognize that this gender policing harms all women and girls.

BENEFITS OF TRANS-INCLUSIVE SPORTS POLICIES

+ Sports Foster Resilience and Mental Well-Being

Participation in sports provides critical opportunities for vulnerable youth, particularly those who have faced adversity. For transgender youth, sports can serve as a source of resilience and empowerment, mitigating the effects of discrimination, victimization, and stigma while promoting mental health and well-being.

+ Sports Build Social Cohesion and Reduce Prejudice

Athletic participation fosters meaningful interactions among cisgender and transgender individuals (as well as across many other lines of difference), promoting empathy and understanding. These relationships help reduce transphobia, exclusionary attitudes, and prejudice, creating more inclusive communities.

+ Inclusive Policies Improve Safety and Belonging

When transgender youth are accepted as teammates and competitors, they gain the same benefits as all athletes. Research shows that schools with LGBTQ+-inclusive policies, such as anti-bullying measures, report lower suicide attempts and higher levels of school belonging. Gender-inclusive sports policies similarly contribute to safer, more welcoming environments for all students.

+ Supportive Environments Save Lives

LGBTQ+ youth who are a part of accepting communities are significantly less likely to attempt suicide. Ensuring transgender youth have access to inclusive sports opportunities contributes to a broader culture of acceptance, improving mental health outcomes and overall well-being.

“My transgender daughter, Jazz, has always been an athlete. She participated in many sports, but her favorite was soccer. When Jazz was eight years old, her travel league banned her from playing on the girls’ soccer team. Although she was allowed to practice with the team, she was barred from participating in games due to concerns that she had an unfair advantage. She was forced to sit on the bench while her team competed. The league offered her the option to play on the boys’ team, and with hesitation, she joined. Unfortunately, the experience was traumatic, and Jazz was ultimately forced to quit. For nearly three years, we fought for Jazz’s right to play. Our battle reached the federal level, where Jazz’s plight and the discrimination she faced were recognized. As a result of hearing her story, the United States Soccer Federation changed its policy, ensuring equal treatment for all transgender soccer players. At the age of 11, Jazz was finally allowed to play alongside her friends.”

-Jeanette Jennings

WHAT YOU AND YOUR COMMUNITY CAN DO

As Jewish leaders and institutions, it is our responsibility to honor the dignity and divinity of all of our community members and do our part to ensure trans athletes can access the benefits listed above. Here are steps you can take to do just that:

- Do your research! Check out our reading list below.
- Interrupt misinformation when you hear it. Refocus the conversation away from misinformation and towards the reality that all people deserve dignity and access to sports.
- Learn more about what your institution can do to be a safe haven for LGBTQ+ members, [read this resource](#).
- Consult with [Keshet’s Education & Training team](#) about next steps for your community.
- Join [Thrive: The Jewish Coalition to Defend Trans and LGBTQ+ Youth](#) to add your organization’s voice to critical federal and state advocacy and get personalized support in navigating this political climate.
- Advocate against trans sports bans in your local communities and states by getting involved with [Athlete Ally](#) and/or [Equality Advocates](#) in your state.

FURTHER READING

- [The Future of Women's Sports Includes Trans Women and Girls](#), Athlete Ally
 - [Fair Play The Importance of Sports Participation for Transgender Youth](#), American Progress
 - [The Trans Sports Attacks were Never About Sports](#), Erin in the Morning
 - [2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People](#), The Trevor Project
 - [Get the Facts about Bans on Sports Participation By Transgender & Non-Binary Students](#), Human Rights Campaign
 - [5 Things to Know to Make Your Feminism Trans-Inclusive](#), Human Rights Campaign
 - [Trans Misconceptions and Facts](#), Keshet
 - [Fair Play: How Sports Shape the Gender Debates](#), Katie Barnes
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