



Five Years Later: What I've Learned About Women and Men in Sports

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In July, a male athlete won a national women's event—again. This time, the winner was not swimmer Lia Thomas but tennis player Alicia Rowley, a man who “self-identifies” as a woman and won the 55-and-over singles title at the United States Tennis Association (USTA) National Women's Grass Court Championships. Rowley also won the National Indoor Championships in both singles and doubles in May.

What is the USTA thinking?

That same month, the world governing body for cycling came to its senses. Like the world governing bodies for swimming (World Aquatics) and running (World Athletics), the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) now prohibits males who have experienced male puberty from participating in UCI international events, in all categories, in all disciplines, regardless of how they “identify.” World Rugby, the World Boxing Council, Badminton England, British Rowing, and British Triathlon have created similar policies.

This is a trend. Sport governing bodies are realizing that women do not want to, and should not have to, compete against men. Let's hope the USTA is next.

Fairness has always been important to me. In fact, the reason I chose tennis—besides the fact that my family played it—is that it's a fair sport. The ball is either in or it's out.

Fairness was on my mind in 2018 when I inadvertently got swept up in the trans athletes-in-women's-sports maelstrom with this tweet: “Clearly that can't be right. You can't just proclaim yourself a female and be able to compete against women.”

I got attacked like crazy on Twitter. Wanting to be open-minded and respectful, I took the tweet down and promised to educate myself, and for the past five years, I've been doing that. I've been reading about testosterone. I've been talking with scientists. I've been listening to female athletes and trans athletes, young and old. And I've learned a lot.

So what have I learned? That this is a touchy subject. Male athletes who “identify as women” are upset at state laws banning them from women's sports teams. They're worried about vulnerable children. And they want to play sports.

I get it. Having been openly lesbian since 1981, I'm no stranger to public abuse and ridicule. I respect all people's rights to dress and behave in ways that do not conform to gender stereotypes. After all, that's a longtime goal of feminism. I respect everyone's rights to nondiscrimination in employment and housing. And of course, I respect everyone's quest to play sports.

I supported Renée Richards when she wanted to play on the women's tour in the seventies because I thought she was a one-off. I would not have supported her if she had dominated the tour. Little did I know that rowing, weightlifting, lacrosse, field hockey, basketball, volleyball, surfing, skateboarding, pickleball, and even disc golf, believe it or not, would be struggling with this issue today, with males (transwomen) insisting on their “right” to play in the female category.

Do you realize that, according to [a recent Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#), 69 percent of males who identify as women have not undergone any hormone treatment, and 84 percent have not had surgery? Physically,

they're just men. Even those who undergo any or all medical procedures retain [performance advantages](#) in strength, power, height, weight, heart size, and oxygen capacity—which Richards now admits. Even though she was in her forties, she still kicked ass. As [she said publicly in 2012](#), “I know if I’d had surgery at the age of 22, and then at 24 went on the tour, no genetic woman in the world would have been able to come close to me. And so I’ve reconsidered my opinion.”

Serena Williams [made the same basic point](#) when Grand Slam champion Andy Murray challenged her to an exhibition match in 2013. She refused, explaining to David Letterman, “Andy Murray, he’s been joking about myself and him playing a match. I’m like, ‘Andy, seriously, are you kidding me?’ If I were to play Andy Murray, I would lose 6-0, 6-0. The men are a lot faster, and they serve harder. They hit harder. It’s just a different game.”

Paula Scanlan, one of Lia Thomas’ teammates at the University of Pennsylvania, has told me how oppressed she and her teammates felt. University officials told them that Lia’s “right” to swim on the women’s team took precedence over their own rights to fair competitions—and locker room privacy.

Riley Gaines, who competed against Thomas, has [tweeted](#), “Lia Thomas is not a brave, courageous woman who EARNED a national title. He is an arrogant, cheat who STOLE a national title from a hardworking, deserving woman.”

The promise of Title IX has not been realized, 51 years after its inception. According to [a report by the Women’s Sports Foundation](#), high school girls enjoy 1.1 million fewer sports opportunities than boys do, and college women enjoy 80,000 fewer opportunities than men. Champion Women, Inc. [has found](#) that women lose out on 1.1 billion dollars in college scholarship dollars alone, not to mention inequities in sponsorships and media coverage.

Can males who identify as women be accommodated in sports? Of course. They can play in the men’s category. The men’s category can be redefined as “open.” Or they can create their own events, as the Gay Games have done every four years since 1982. I support any accommodations so long as male athletes do not take participation opportunities or scholarships from female athletes.

The female category was created to provide opportunities for women to compete fairly. It was always intended to exclude males. We need to keep excluding them.

I promised to educate myself, and I have. I plan to keep advocating for fair competitions—and equal rights—for female athletes. I hope you’ll join me.

Martina Navratilova is a former professional tennis player who won 59 major titles in singles, doubles, and mixed doubles, the most of anyone in the Open era. A member of [the Women’s Sports Policy Working Group](#), she can be found on Twitter: @Martina.

