

# Transgender athletes in combat sports: to fight or not to fight?

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# Transgender definition

- At times referred to as trans
- Have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from the sex that they were assigned at birth.
- When transgender people with medical assistance transition from one sex to another-they are referred to as transsexual.
- Two broad category-trans men and trans women. Umbrella term and may also include people who are non-binary or genderqueer. The term very broadly may include cross-dressers.
- No universally accepted definition, including among researchers.
- Transgender is distinct from sexual orientation. Transgender people may identify as heterosexual (straight), homosexual (gay or lesbian), bisexual, asexual, or otherwise, or may decline to label their sexual orientation.
- Opposite of *transgender* is *cisgender* (persons whose gender identity matches their assigned sex).
- Many transgender people experience gender dysphoria, and seek medical treatments including hormone replacement therapy (HRT), sex reassignment surgery, or psychotherapy

**Source: Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transgender>)**

# Transgender athletes

- One of the most polarizing issues in sports over the last few years has been the debate over transgender athletes:
  - What are the rights of transgender athletes?
  - Who is allowed to compete as a woman in women's sports?
  - Who is allowed to compete as a male against cisgender males?

# Transgender swimsuit model on Sports Illustrated cover: 'We deserve this moment'



Leyna Bloom (Source: The Hill <https://thehill.com/blogs/in-the-know/in-the-know/563947-transgender-swimsuit-model-on-sports-illustrated-cover-we/>)

# Different rules and policies for transgender athletes across different sports



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## **NCAA Transgender policies**

**“The NCAA Board of Governors firmly and unequivocally supports the opportunity for transgender student-athletes to compete in college sports. This commitment is grounded in our values of inclusion and fair competition.”**

 

Source: <https://www.ktvb.com/article/news/local/208/ncaa-transgender-athlete-policy-update/277-5fc6de4d-c9d9-409c-91cc-15930a58dd2e>

# Different rules and policies for transgender athletes across different sports

## ***NCAA Policy on Transgender Student-Athlete Participation***

The following policies clarify participation of transgender student-athletes undergoing hormonal treatment for gender transition:

1. A trans male (FTM) student-athlete who has received a medical exception for treatment with testosterone for diagnosed Gender Identity Disorder or gender dysphoria and/or Transsexualism, for purposes of NCAA competition may compete on a men's team, but is no longer eligible to compete on a women's team without changing that team status to a mixed team.
2. A trans female (MTF) student-athlete being treated with testosterone suppression medication for Gender Identity Disorder or gender dysphoria and/or Transsexualism, for the purposes of NCAA competition may continue to compete on a men's team but may not compete on a women's team without changing it to a mixed team status until completing one calendar year of testosterone suppression treatment.<sup>8</sup>

- *Source: Transgender inclusion in athletics.*  
<https://gradynewssource.uga.edu/transgender-inclusion-in-athletics/>

# Different rules and policies for transgender athletes across different sports

- International Olympic Committee (IOC) guidelines require that all trans women athletes declare their gender and not change that assertion for at least four years, as well as have a testosterone level of less than 10 nanomoles per liter for at least one year prior to competition and throughout the period of eligibility.

# Transgender athletes and sports: main issue

- Should transgender women compete in women's sports?
- Transgender athlete will have an unfair advantage over the cisgender woman competitor (s).
- Higher testosterone level, differences in body fat, musculature and bony structure are some of the reasons postulated to give the transgender woman an advantage over her cisgender competitor.

# Transgender athletes and combat sports: main issue

- **SHOULD A TRANSGENDER WOMAN BE GRANTED LICENSURE TO FIGHT A CISGENDER WOMAN IN A PROFESSIONAL BOXING OR MMA BOUT?**

# Main concerns:

- Is this a fair bout?
  - Arguments against-While testosterone can be used as metric to ensure fairness at the time of the bout, many would argue that by a time a transgender woman combatant launches her professional career she has already gone through male puberty thus conferring her with the musculature and bony structure of a male. So, a transgender woman combatant has an unfair advantage over her cisgender woman combatant.
  - Arguments for: genetic differences are found in athletes of the same sex. Muscle build, joint flexibility, speed, and agility are variable traits which gives one athlete an advantage or disadvantage over the opponent (s). These innate genetic traits along with intense physical training, physical and mental stamina is what gives a combatant an edge over a competitor. It is what distinguishes a champion from a runner up in combat sports.

# Main concerns:

- Is this a safe bout (with respect to medical concerns)?
  - Arguments against: Combat sports such as boxing are unique since every punch thrown at the head is thrown with the intention of winning by causing a knockout (aka a concussion). Resulting these sports carry an exceedingly high risk for both acute and chronic neurological injuries. Boxers have died during a bout or in the immediate aftermath due to traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) such as an acute subdural hematoma (SDH), epidural hematoma (EDH), subarachnoid hemorrhage (SAH), intracranial hematoma and injury to the great vessels of the neck such as carotid or vertebral artery dissection.  
***Allowing a transgender woman to compete raises concern for the health and safety of her cisgender woman combatant.***

# Concerns/issues with respect to trans men athletes

- IOC allows trans men athletes (athletes who transitioned from female to male) to participate without any restriction.
- Should a transgender man be granted licensure to fight a cisgender man in a professional boxing or MMA bout?
  - Is this a fair bout?
  - While testosterone can again be used as metric to ensure fairness at the time of the bout, many would argue that by a time a transgender man combatant launches his professional career he has already gone through female puberty thus conferring him with the musculature and bony structure of a female.
  - Such a combatant may be at a disadvantage against his cisgender man combatant.
  - Allowing this bout to take place raises concern for the health and safety of the transgender male combatant.
  - However, in the case of a trans male with a superior skill set, better training and superior mental and physical stamina than his cisgender male opponent, is a trans male athlete really at risk of injury competing in this scenario?

Source: Sethi NK, Khabie V. Transgender athletes in combat sports: to fight or not to fight? ARP Journal of Combat Sports Medicine. Volume 3 Issue 2.

# Transgender athletes in combat sports: to fight or not to fight?

- Polarizing topic with no easy answers.
- Needs to be debated, scientifically studied, and decided purely on scientific and medical grounds based on concrete evidence-based medicine with the foremost goal of protecting the health and safety of all combatants.
- GOAL OF ALL CONCERNED PARTIES SHOULD BE-
  - TO HAVE TWO EQUALLY SKILLED AND MATCHED ATHLETES COMPETING IN THE CAGE OR RING, ON A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD.
  - KEEP THE MATCHES FAIR, COMPETITIVE, ENTERTAINING, AND SAFE FOR ALL COMBATANTS.

# CONCLUSIONS

- While we debate “to fight or not to fight”, the combat sports community should support transgender rights.
- Transgender rights is an important issue which the combat sports community should not turn its back on.
- The combat sports community should recognize the gender identity of an individual and champion to protect transgender individuals against discrimination at their workplace, in employment, education and access to healthcare.

CONCLUSIONS-TO FIGHT OR NOT TO FIGHT?

*...IF WE FOLLOW THE SCIENCE WE SHALL HAVE  
OUR ANSWER...*