EMERALD STUDIES IN SPORT AND GENDER

TRANS ATHLETES' RESISTANCE

The Struggle for Justice in Sport

EDITED BY
ALI DURHAM GREEY
HELEN JEFFERSON LENSKYJ

Trans Athletes' Resistance

Emerald Studies in Sport and Gender

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Ali and Helen would like to dedicate this book to trans athletes of all ages and levels, and to honour their courageous resistance as they fight for the freedom to participate in the sports of their choice.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Binary World of Sport: Belonging and Resistance

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj and Ali Durham Greey

Abstract

In the face of widespread opposition and hostility, trans and nonbinary athletes, from recreational to professional levels, continue to resist exclusion and oppression by daring to compete, participate and play. The long-standing binary thinking that characterizes sport poses particular challenges for trans women, who are positioned by advocates of trans exclusion as an alleged threat to women's sport.

As context for this discussion, Lenskyj examines how social psychologists have contributed to understandings of belonging and community and the implications for trans and nonbinary athletes' rights to share the benefits that sport offers. The concept of 'deliberative freedoms' – including freedom to live one's life without having others view certain traits as 'costs' – provides a framework for investigating resistance.

Greey then draws on a sociological understanding of gender to argue that inclusion is not synonymous with belonging. Belonging for trans athletes, Greey argues, requires more than the 'letter of the law.' Belonging requires recognition from teammates, coaches and other sport community members. An overview of terminology is presented, followed by an overview of chapters, summarizing the key themes and findings.

Keywords: Resistance; belonging; intersectionality; nonbinary; fairness; sex; gender; sport; transgender

Belonging and Resistance: Negotiating Contradictions

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj

Sport has a long-standing reputation in western society as a 'social good'. Since the early 1900s, the socialization function of organized sport and physical activity has been widely promoted in schools and communities, initially for boys and

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young men, and, more recently, for girls and young women. Belonging to a club or team, according to this line of thinking, fosters a sense of belonging and community.

As practised in most western countries, the organization of sport is based on the assumption that sex/gender are binary. While progressive scholars of the 1980s aptly labelled sport the last bastion of male supremacy, contemporary critics, including contributors to *Justice for Trans Athletes* (Greey & Lenskyj, 2023) and to this book, document how sport remains one of the last bastions of binary thinking. It would be difficult to contemplate any organization that polices the boundaries between male and female as rigidly and rigorously as sports federations. For example, would the management of a symphony orchestra abandon the principle of selection based on merit and instead use testosterone levels to determine who plays wind instruments, percussion instruments or stringed instruments? Would state departments of education base teachers' promotion to administrative positions on testosterone?

Sport promises acceptance, but it also holds the threat of rejection. Children and youth whose interests and skills do not lie in these areas, those who do not conform to gendered expectations, and those who are marginalized because of racism, classism, or other systems of discrimination, are unlikely to enjoy this sense of belonging. Two examples below illustrate the complexities of these processes in childhood, most notably the ways in which acts of resistance play out in unanticipated ways.

Linda (a pseudonym), a ciswoman who identified as lesbian, reflected on her childhood experiences in gym classes (Lenskyj, 2003). She described how her level of play was considered 'too rough' for a girl, and so she was given the choice of playing scatter-dodge with the girls, using only her left hand, or joining the boys' game. She chose to play with the boys, and was the last one standing, but many years later, she could still recall her ambivalence as she watched the girls on the sidelines cheering her on.

> I had this really very mixed thing that has stayed with me ever since. I wanted to wipe out every boy in that group and I did, by the way – I won . . . I wanted to win for them, for the girls, for them to see that it could be done. At the same time, what was mixed up with this was the incredible contempt for the girls because they were all in their little dresses and little shoes sitting passively on the side, cheering for me, and I didn't want to be one of them and yet I knew I was one of them.
>
> (Cited in Lenskyj, 2003)

The story resonates with me as I recall my reaction, at about 9 years of age, to my friend Susan's announcement that she had started taking ballet classes. I had just begun piano lessons, which I considered much more exciting and important than ballet. (In hindsight, I wish I could have told her that I'd taken up martial arts, but that only happened 30 years later.)

My immediate response was to mock Susan for doing 'stupid things with pointy toes'. She was conventionally 'feminine' in the context of 1950s middle-class Sydney (Australia), and I wasn't. In fact, Linda's word 'contempt' captures my own feelings about Susan's ballet endeavours. For better or for worse, I didn't realize that my reaction set me even further apart from the clique that welcomed her and other 'feminine' girls. Being completely non-athletic at that age also sealed my fate as an 'outsider' in a school that had mandatory sport or PE classes four days per week.

As these reflections suggest, resistance produces mixed feelings and unanticipated outcomes. Rejecting hegemonic femininity in these historically specific contexts was personally satisfying for Linda and for me – in fact, we both had clear memories of the incidents many years later – but our individual resistance did not change the social and cultural systems that produced rigid expectations of gender-appropriate behaviour and excluded us as non-conforming girls.

Although there have been positive social changes in the last few decades, the challenges facing trans individuals in sport and in other social contexts are significantly more complex than either Linda or I, as cisgirls, faced.

The 'Need to Belong'

The two personal examples above invoke the concepts of connection, belongingness and 'need-to-belong' that social psychologists began to develop in greater depth in the 1990s. Reviewing the existing work on attachment, hierarchy of needs and other relevant areas, Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) concluded that 'a need to belong is a fundamental human motivation'. However, they failed to explore how gendered and cultural expectations shape these needs. For example, Carol Gilligan's (1982) pioneering work examined the ways in which socialization of girls and women led them to value 'webs of connection' and thus influenced their moral reasoning. In the sport context of the 1980s and 1990s, too, there was some evidence that girls and women valued fun and friendship somewhat more highly than winning and beating one's opponent, while boys and men tended to prioritize winning (Lenskyj, 1994).

Of relevance to questions of values, Indigenous anthropologists explain how the perspectives of Maoris (New Zealand Indigenous peoples) on the concept of *community* reach beyond western notions of individualism to value the 'living web of the world'. Maori peoples promote a relational worldview: 'I belong therefore I am' or 'I belong therefore I am, and so *we* become' (Spiller et al., 2011, emphasis added). Relational and inclusive worldviews stand in stark contrast to western notions of individualism that animate sport as currently constituted. Cis athletes have the privilege of belonging and claiming an identity as an individual and as a member of a group, while trans, nonbinary and intersex athletes are deliberately, cruelly and often violently excluded from *belonging* and from *becoming.* As Greey (in Greey & Lenskyj, 2023, p.11) explained, 'My own story and those of countless other athletes, trans and cisgender alike, suggests that sport can be crucial to experiences of gendered becoming and belonging'.

Many trans athletes and allies call for sport to be reorganized in ways that are genuinely inclusive, changes that would require not only abandoning sex and gender categories based on flawed science but would also generate creative alternatives to the achievement model that dominates all levels of western sport (Lenskyj, 2020; Pielke, 2023; Travers, 2023). Contributors to this volume explore and document some of these alternatives.

Freedom to Be...

Investigations into belongingness often fail to consider the converse of the 'need-to-belong' – that is, the need to be different, the need to resist. For some, the 'need to be different' may manifest itself in an unequivocal rejection of binary thinking about gender and sex, by developing an identity that defies gender-based categorization, as exemplified by those who choose the pronouns they/them.

Some key questions emerge: What happens to those children and adults who approach 'belongingness' from a different position, or to those who are not permitted to belong? How do they negotiate the contradictions and the ambivalence they feel? Do they want to be trailblazers or do they simply want to be accepted as team-mates and co-competitors? Do they want to change themselves in order to fit in, or do they want sport to change?

In her 1985 publication, pioneering Canadian feminist scientist Ursula Franklin posed the question 'Will women change technology or will technology change women?' (Franklin, 1985). Short answer: the women who succeeded in male-dominated areas such as science and technology were unlikely to 'rock the boat', and if they did, they would soon discover the perils of doing so. The same prediction applied to sport: women who gained entry to decision-making positions in sport organizations were largely limited to making reform efforts from within (Lenskyj, 2003, Ch. 4).

Now, in 2023, let us pose a similar question: Will trans athletes and their allies change sport, or will sport change trans athletes and their allies? The controversy over the related issue of intersex athletes' eligibility suggests that *sport* will not change. When Caster Semenya challenged her exclusion from women's sport, sport authorities required her to change her body through hormone treatment to lower her (endogenous) testosterone levels. She refused the treatment, and took the only other option available, by competing in middle-distance races instead of sprints. In other words, she had to change her training programme, and by extension, her body, to accommodate the discriminatory policy.

Deliberative Freedoms

Legal scholar Sophia Moreau examined Semenya's experiences in relation to the concept of 'deliberative freedoms', a concept that she explained as follows:

> ...freedom to deliberate about one's life...without having to treat certain traits (or other people's assumptions about them) as *costs*

> and without having to live one's life with these traits always before one's eyes.
>
> (Moreau, 2020, p. 84, emphasis added)

In Semenya's words, 'I don't want to be someone people want me to be. I just want to be me', while Dutee Chand, another intersex athlete whose eligibility was unfairly challenged on the grounds of high endogenous testosterone, said, 'I am who I am' (cited in Moreau, 2020, p. 80). The freedom not to have to think constantly about 'certain traits' is largely taken for granted by cis, heterosexual and gender-conforming women, and in sport, their right to participate in the women's division is unlikely to be questioned.

For women like Semenya and Chand, to have deliberative freedom would allow them to be their authentic selves. After all, they had lived their lives as girls/women without question until their outstanding athletic performances attracted global attention – and suspicion. While trans women and men also express the desire to be their authentic selves, their situation is significantly different from that of intersex women, and, for them, deliberative freedom is arguably more difficult to attain because of the process of transitioning. In the public eye, amplified by mainstream and social media, their trans identities and aspects of their transition are likely to be seen as their most salient features (Campbell, 2021). Given this reality, some trans athletes may welcome the opportunity to speak publicly as advocates and educators – exemplars of trans pride – while others may want to experience sport as a safe and welcoming place where their trans identity is simply accepted.

For nonbinary athletes, deliberative freedom is further complicated by the binary thinking that characterizes western society in general, and sport in particular. Even the so-called 'pronoun debate', specifically the use of 'they/them', remains contentious in 2023. By way of illustration, imagine a scenario where the questioner is intentionally making the person's nonbinary appearance a 'cost' that they need to explain and justify, by asking them, 'Are you male or female?' To experience deliberative freedom, the nonbinary person may answer 'yes' or 'no' or 'neither' or 'both', or may choose simply to ignore the question as irrelevant. To quote Layshia Clarendon (quoting poet Andrea Gibson), 'my pronouns haven't even been invented yet' (WNBA's Layshia Clarendon, 2021).

On Belonging: Why Inclusion Isn't Enough

Ali Durham Greey

Participants in discussions about trans athletes tend to be polarized between those advocating for exclusion and inclusion. Certainly, inclusion is preferable to exclusion, when trans athletes are prohibited from competing; however, inclusion is not a sufficient objective. To experience the full benefits of sport, trans athletes must become full members, rather than simply being included. Consider, for example, the experience of Kelly [pseudonym] a varsity athlete. She is technically permitted to play, although she has had to assert her right to play multiple times

in her varsity career. However, her teammates deny her full membership through social slights or microagressions on a regular basis. Without full and authentic membership on the team, the promise of Kelly's inclusion rings hollow and Kelly's experience is unfulfilling.

Evelyn Nakano Glenn's (2011) work offers insight into the importance of interpersonal interactions which signal belonging. Her work suggests that to experience the benefits of formal legal rights enabling inclusion, one must also receive recognition from community members. Glenn writes:

> Citizenship is not just a matter of formal legal status; it is a matter of belonging, which requires recognition by other members of the community. Community members participate in drawing the boundaries of citizenship and defining who is entitled to civil, political, and social rights by granting or withholding recognition. (2011, p. 3)

Glenn distinguishes between citizenship as a formal legal status and what she terms 'substantive citizenship,' an experiential sense of belonging within one's community. Although Glenn's concept focuses specifically on citizenship within the nation state, it also offers insight into the limits of inclusion for trans athletes. Trans athletes' belonging in sporting environments is influenced by both formal rules imposed by organizations as well as informal social interactions with teammates, coaches and other members of sporting communities.

Belonging – as a concept and an experience – is not synonymous with *inclusion*. An athlete whose peers and coaches recognize and affirm their belonging will have a vastly different experience than an athlete who has been merely included. Inclusion – as I understand it – solely means that an athlete has not been excluded outright. Inclusion often translates into mere tokenism and grudging conformity to the 'letter of the law' rather than genuine acceptance and celebration of difference. Belonging, on the other hand, provides an athlete with a felt sense of mattering to and membership within the team or the sport. Trans athletes' belonging necessitates more than token inclusion, it requires community recognition. Recognition is conferred through interactional gestures which signal another's belonging. These can include gestures – spoken or unspoken – that communicate one is welcome, considered and a part of. Belonging is a relational and interactional status. One's felt sense of belonging is secured and maintained through recognition provided by other community members. On the other hand, belonging can also be denied when community members do not provide recognition; and belonging can also be revoked, when community members withdraw the recognition they had previously provided.

Terminology

- *Trans* people are those whose gender is not consistent with their gender assignment at birth.

- *Nonbinary* people's gender identity and/or gender expression exists outside the categories of man and woman. They may define their gender as between, beyond, or entirely separate from binary understandings of gender.
- *Trans girls/women* are girls/women who were assigned male at birth, and *trans boys/men* are boys/men who were assigned female at birth.

Overview of Chapters

Ali Durham Greey

NOTE: The cut-off point for this book was 31 December 2022. Challenges that trans athletes and allies face, and the resistance that they mount against these challenges, are constantly evolving, and we hope to see these topics addressed in future publications.

Contributors to Part 1 examine the broader context of trans athletes' resistance. These chapters outline the challenging sociopolitical, institutional and policy contexts in which trans athletes' resistance operates. Authors examine the ideologies embedded within modern sport, and present examples of trans-inclusion policies.

In Chapter 2, C.B. Lucas and Matthew Hodler counter dominant discursive portrayals of trans women athletes by pointing to the ways in which sport is already and inherently unfair. Drawing on two case studies – cyclist Austin Killips and swimmer Lia Thomas – Lucas and Hodler examine the intersecting forms of oppression enacted upon trans women athletes' bodies by modern sport structures: heterosexism, cisnormativity and white supremacy. The authors employ these case studies to illustrate how modern sport reproduces dominant medicalized narratives to construct limits around what constitutes acceptable transness. They argue that modern sport commits harm through denying opportunities for expansive gendered subjectivity. They advocate for resisting and rejecting modern sport's regulatory practices and, instead, building queer futures, calling for reimagining and resisting sporting structures that take into account multiple ways of gendered being: 'Transness is ephemeral, sport should be too'.

In Chapter 3, CK Snyder examines how trans athletes navigate visibility and representation within an extreme right-wing political climate in the Global South. The focus of Snyder's chapter is the *Meninos Bons de Bola*, 'Soccer Star Boys', a trans men's *futebol* team. Drawing on photos of the team in their locker room, Snyder explains how the Meninos Bons de Bola resist the fascist Brazilian state through nudity at the same time as they carefully guard their visibility within a hostile sociopolitical climate. Focusing on two photographs of the team in the locker room, Snyder unpacks the resistance engendered by the exposure of these trans athletes' bodies. The photographs capture the athlete's vulnerability, strength, humanity and joy. Snyder points to the ways in which the Meninos Bons de Bola's photographs contest the fascist violence and repression rampant in Brazilian Bolsonarism through images that insist on the players' humanity and beauty. The team asserts that their bodies on the pitch and in the locker room are 'art, activism, and resistance,' and Snyder points to how the team uses futebol as

an avenue to fight for trans justice. Snyder argues that, in the context of Bolsonarism and the daily violence this ideology inspires, the Meninos Bons de Bola have adopted a careful approach to trans resistance, one that emphasizes the importance of discernment and caution regarding the team's visibility and representation.

In Chapter 4, Storr, Posbergh and Bekker examine the Australian context for trans-inclusion sport policies. The authors argue that applying elite sport trans-inclusion policies to the community sport context is harmful and ineffective, since elite policies bar trans and gender diverse athletes – many of whom do not even aspire to compete at a high level – from the social and physical benefits of recreational community sport. The authors survey the Australian community sport policy context, noting that many community sport organizations prioritize the inclusion of athletes of all genders. However, they point out that the trans-inclusion policies of some community organizations actually function as trans-exclusion policies that were implemented as a result of aggressive anti-trans lobbying, a move that they refer to as creating 'policy on the run'. They identify several barriers to the implementation of effective and inclusive trans policies and guidelines for sporting organizations.

In Part 2, contributors draw on their firsthand experiences of being trans and nonbinary in the athletic arena. These chapters point to the complexity of trans athletes' resistance at the individual level. They capture emotions ranging from disappointment and misery to humour and joy in trans athletes' experiences. These chapters should not be seen as representative of a typical trans athlete experience, an experience which Lucas and Hodler (in Chapter 2) adeptly argue does not exist. Greey and Irving employ autoethnographic research methods to legitimize and communicate knowledge gleaned from lived experience.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that draws directly on the researcher's lived experience to improve understandings of social phenomena. Researcher reflexivity is crucial to autoethnography, whereby the researcher pays close attention to their reflections, relationships and emotions. Some in the social sciences have discredited autoethnography, labelling it 'me-search' a qualitative method lacking empiricism. It's important to note that this critique of autoethnography often relies on positivist understandings of science that are not suited to qualitative methods. This positivist approach assumes that for research to be empirical, it must be objective and free from bias. As a result, the researcher is directed to locate themself at an objective distance from the researched, an analytic distance which is – of course – impossible within autoethnographic research methods. Feminist and critical race scholars, however, have challenged and critiqued the importance placed on analytic distance and objectivity. These scholars have argued that this positivist logic functions to centre cisgender, straight, white and male bodies as objective, while rendering Black, Indigenous, racialized bodies, as well as women and queer and trans people as biased (Collins, 2008; Haraway, 1988; Harris, 2021; Schilt, 2018). These marginalized bodies are marked by race, gender and sexuality and are unable to represent themselves as objective (code for white, straight and male). As a result, autoethnographic research methods resist positivist logics which uphold objectivity as an ideal or