

Including Transitioning and Transitioned Athletes in Sport:

Issues, Facts and Perspectives

SUMMARY



Prepared for the
Promising Practices: Working with Transitioning/Transitioned Athletes in Sport Project
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The project entitled: *Promising Practices: Working with Transitioning/Transitioned Athletes in Sport* has been conducted by a working group comprised of representatives from AthletesCAN, the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) and the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS). The project is examining issues surrounding the inclusion and integration of transitioning/transitioned athletes in Canadian sport.

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Summary

The *Promising Practices: Working with Transitioning/Transitioned Athletes in Sport* project has been initiated by AthletesCAN, the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) and the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) to identify and help address barriers that inhibit participation of transitioning and transitioned athletes in sport. This discussion paper aims to contribute to that goal by promoting informed and respectful dialogue, consultation and action within the Canadian sport community based on a shared understanding of human biological and psychological diversity. The paper draws from the findings of two recent reviews commissioned for the *Promising Practices* project to examine the available social science literature¹ and the available biological science literature² relevant to transitioned athletes in sport.

Both biological science research and social science research are substantiating that the narrowly defined binary model of male and female identity, so deeply engrained in our culture, actually represents just the end points of a continuum of sex and gender diversity. In fact, it is likely that close to 2 out of every 100 people do not fit exactly or at all in the traditional concepts of being male or female. This degree of variance challenges the once immutable assumption that we can accurately differentiate between who is physically male and who is physically female, and thereby have a clear division on that basis within sport. The paper considers issues and facts about that division for transitioning and transitioned athletes from three perspectives: equality, human rights and dignity; the role of inclusion and exclusion in competitive sport; and concerns about whether transitioning and transitioned athletes have possible performance advantages. The paper also provides the broader context of what we can learn from past parallels in sport and society as recorded in the literature.

Key findings in the paper include:

1. Sex verification testing of athletes should be considered a human rights violation and eliminated from all levels of sport.
2. Doping control procedures make it virtually impossible for physically born male or female athletes competing at the national level or international level to intentionally cheat by masquerading as the opposite sex.
3. There is no evidence or convincing logic that athletes would transition in order to gain competitive advantages.
4. While generally there are numerous anatomical and physiological differences between men and women, there also is a vast range of anatomical and physiological variation within each sex. The implication is to ask whether transitioned athletes, in fact, fit in the broad variance that already exists within their new sex.
5. Both testosterone and estrogen can influence performance, and therefore transitioning and transitioned athletes participating in competitive sport should try to consistently have sex hormone levels within the normal range for their new sex.

¹ Kevin B. Wamsley, "Sport and Transitioning/Transitioned Athletes: A Review of the Social Science Literature" (February, 2008) <http://www.athletescan.com/Content/Publications.asp>.

² Michaela C. Devries, "Do Transitioned Athletes Compete at an Advantage or Disadvantage as Compared to Physically Born Men and Women: A Review of the Scientific Literature" (May 18, 2008) <http://www.athletescan.com/Content/Publications.asp>.

6. Physically born women and transitioned women have similar concentrations of both testosterone and estrogen. Estrogen supplementation to transitioned women resulted in haemoglobin levels similar to those found in physically born women, and similar muscle mass at the upper range of development. Subcutaneous fat content (fat just under the skin) remained lower while total body weight was higher in transitioned women.
7. Transitioned men can have higher estrogen and testosterone concentrations compared with physically born men but the difference in testosterone levels can be eliminated by using a new long-lasting testosterone dosing regime. However, for all approved dosing regimes, testosterone supplementation to transitioned men resulted in haemoglobin levels similar to those in physically born men, and similar muscle mass at the upper range of development even when concentrations were higher. The only difference that continued following one year of supplementation was a higher amount of subcutaneous fat in transitioned men which could diminish performance in competitions with physically born men.
8. To date, there is a lack of available research or other reliable scientific evidence to either support or refute the position that transitioned athletes compete at an advantage or disadvantage compared with physically born men and women athletes. In view of the lack of available research and the methodology requirements for credible new research, the answer to that question may never be known with certainty given the low prevalence of transitioned individuals in the population.
9. The International Olympic Committee and World Anti-Doping Agency play influential leadership roles in how the sport community views sex and gender issues, and how the sport community sets policies establishing related eligibility and participation criteria.
10. The eligibility requirements in the International Olympic Committee's Stockholm Consensus on sex reassignment in sport should be reviewed considering that few metabolic changes were found beyond one year of cross-sex hormone supplementation. The conditions that are imposed should not be vague or onerous to the point of being barriers. Eligibility requirements also need to address the full range of choices possible for transitioning and transitioned athletes. This includes the choice to have hormone supplementation but not sex reassignment surgery which has additional considerations outside the scope of the literature reviews.
11. The World Anti-Doping Code does not include mandatory standards that address the use of hormone supplementation for transition purposes. This could result in discretionary decisions that might be inconsistent from one case to the next.

The paper concludes that the challenge ahead lies in the defining obligation of sport to be fair and ethical without arbitrarily excluding athletes. Current approaches to 'gender verification' do not meet that test. Responsibility for determining how to fairly and ethically include sex and gender variance within sport rules rests with sport organizations and relevant government ministries. The major issues to address are eligibility criteria involving categorization by sex and anti-doping rules that are open to interpretation and could have significantly different outcomes for transitioning and transitioned athletes. It is time for the sport community to undertake this challenge worldwide, and for Canada to be on the forefront and join with other countries in modelling the leadership required.