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Creating Dialog About Transgender and Intersex Athletes

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Current Events and Teachable Moments: Creating Dialog About Transgender and Intersex Athletes

VIKKI KRANE KATIE SULLIVAN BARAK

Being a “team player” includes valuing and supporting diverse teammates.

“Caster Semenya, Forced to Take Gender Test, Is a Woman...and a Man”—Yaniv (2009)
“LPGA Eliminates ‘Female at Birth’ Rule”—Sports Network (2010)
“GW Hoops Player Kye Allums Changes Sex, Not Team”—CBS News (2010)

Most students and athletes have likely read these headlines on sports news sites on the Internet. But what exactly do they mean? How can they be explained if students ask questions? These news stories offer opportunities for impromptu lessons and teachable moments.

Caster Semenya is a South African runner who burst onto the international scene when she decidedly outran her opponents in the 800-meter race at the 2009 world championships in Berlin. Her unexpected dominance, along with her “masculine” appearance, led the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF, the international governing body for track and field) to order her to undergo a sex test to verify that she is a woman (Yaniv, 2009). After a multitude of genetic, hormonal, and medical tests, results leaked to the press indicated that Semenya is intersex, or was born with both male and female sexual characteristics (Chang, 2009).

The Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) changed its eligibility rules to allow transgender athletes to compete on the tour (Sports Network, 2010). The original bylaws mandated that only people who were “female at birth” were allowed to qualify for LPGA tournaments.

Kye Allums is a member of the women’s basketball team at George Washington University. Before his junior year, Allums publicly acknowledged he was a transgender male; he prefers to be identified by his gender identity as male, but his biological sex is still female (Zeigler, 2010). Because he has decided not to begin transitioning (changing his hormonal or anatomical make-up) at this time, he still is eligible to compete as a female consistent with National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules.

Each of these situations is unique, yet there are some common concepts linking them. Many students may not have heard terms such as *transgender*, *transitioning*, *intersex*, and *gender testing*. Consequently, they may ask questions such as “What does it mean to be transgender?” or “Why is it so hard to know her gender?” The goal of this article is to help physical educators and coaches better understand the issues raised in these recent news stories and to encourage teachers to engage students and athletes in conversation about these topics. Additionally, it is important for teachers and coaches to be able to separate facts from fiction regarding transgender and intersex athletes and to have the necessary language to discuss gender, gender nonconformity, and gender variations with students in a nonthreatening and understandable manner. This article provides an overview of the basic concepts associated with transgender athletes, addresses common misconceptions about them, and

offers strategies for engaging in age-appropriate discussion with students (table 1).

Sex, Gender, and Transgender

When discussing transgendered identities, it is important to start with the basic concepts of sex and gender. *Sex* refers to the physical, biological, chromosomal, and hormonal characteristics associated with being male or female (Brown & Rounsley, 1996). For example, females have breasts, ovaries, and more estrogen than testosterone, whereas males have testes and more testosterone than estrogen. Typically, most people have the physical, biological, chromosomal, and hormonal characteristics consistent with their sex. However, this is not always the case. Some individuals, about 17 out of 1,000 births, are born with chromosomes, internal reproductive organs, or internal or external genitalia that make it unclear whether they are male or female (Moore, 2000). They may have ambiguous-looking external genitals or a combination of male and female physical characteristics (Looy & Bouma, 2005). When this occurs, the individual is considered *intersex*. Often, people who are intersex are unaware of their atypical make-up and live life consistent with their sex assigned at birth (e.g., they appear female as an infant and their birth certificate identifies them as female although internally or genetically they may also have some male characteristics).

From the 1960s through 1999, female athletes competing in Olympic or Olympic-qualifying events were subjected to tests to ensure that they truly were female and that no males were passing as female to enter the women's events (Dickinson, Genel, Robinowitz, Turner, & Woods, 2002). The early tests entailed a visual inspection of athletes' external anatomy. Later testing shifted to an examination of chromosomal and genetic make-up. These later tests, while supposedly less humiliating and more sophisticated, tended to reveal various intersex conditions. Athletes who "failed" their sex test were disqualified from competition (Dickinson et al.). Today, sex testing occurs on a case-by-case basis when suspicions are raised about an athlete's gender (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011).

Although often used synonymously, gender is distinct from sex. *Gender* is a socially constructed grouping of characteristics that categorize an individual as masculine or feminine. In our society, males and females are expected to differ in physical appearance, attire, mannerisms, and personality. What are considered socially accepted behaviors may change over time, yet within a particular context or time period, typical behavior patterns for masculinity or femininity are socially validated (Lucas-Carr & Krane, in review). Generally, masculinity is characterized by strength, assertiveness, independence, and stoicism, whereas femininity is characterized by weakness, gentleness, meekness, emotionality, and grace (Choi, 2000; Messner, 2002). In sport, as in society at large, girls are expected to be feminine and boys are expected to be masculine. Even though both genders can and do participate in a range of sports,

the rules and expectations reveal gendered biases for both men and women (Lorber, 2004).

Gender expression refers to how a person *performs* or outwardly reveals gender (Cho, Laub, Wall, Daley, & Joslin, 2004). For instance, hair style and the type of clothing a person wears are part of her or his gender expression. *Gender identity* is the personal understanding or internal feelings of being male or female (Cho et al.).

For some people, their gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth and this is reflected in both their gender identity and gender expression. This is what *transgender* means: when gender identity and sex do not match (Burdge, 2007). It is important to recognize that how a person expresses gender identity is very individualized and that all people perform and express gender, not just transgender people (Griffin & Carroll, 2010). However, transgender people may stand out because their gender expression may not be consistent with their physical sex. This nonconforming appearance makes them a target of misunderstanding, bias, discrimination, and bullying (Young & Sweeting, 2004). Individuals who choose to live their life without conforming to gender norms may consider themselves to be *gender fluid* or *genderqueer* (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011; Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League [SMYAL], n.d.). Gender fluidity is exactly like it sounds: a free-flowing, nonrestrictive relationship with gender. Those who identify as gender fluid/genderqueer look beyond male and female as lifelong categories and instead may exhibit a range of gender expressions that combine traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics or that shift between appearing male or female.

Some transgender athletes will choose to transition, or begin changing their appearance and body to match their gender identity. This may involve changes to their name, preferred pronoun, hair style, or clothing style. Further, some transgender people will choose to take hormones to delay puberty or to change the physical make-up of their body, or decide to have sex-reassignment surgery. When individuals choose this path and alter their body to bring their gender identity and sex into alignment, they are referred to as *transsexual* (SMYAL, n.d.).

Altogether, sex and gender can be considered a prism in which a wide range of gender identities and expressions may occur (see figure 1). While a prism may radiate obvious lines of color, the spectrum of colors also bleed into one another and can become less distinct. When considering gender identity, sometimes sex and gender are aligned recognizably and in socially expected manners (e.g., feminine females and masculine males). Yet, as seen in the prism, a wide array of outcomes can emerge, which cannot be predicted or prescribed. One way to think about it, consistent with the prism, is to designate the obvious colors as the most common combinations of sex, gender, identity, and expression (e.g., feminine female), while the blurred areas between the bold colors designate less common gender expressions such as masculine females or feminine males. The areas where the colors bleed together reflect transgender, intersex, and

Table 1. Conversations with Students About Transgender and Intersex Athletes

Conversation 1

Student A: I read that a guy is playing on a women's college basketball team.

Student B: How can that be?

Student A: It's weird; the article said he wanted to be on the women's team.

Student B: Coach, how can that be? Isn't it against the rules for guys to be on the women's team?

Teacher: Have you ever heard of transgender? Transgender people?

Student B: What's that?

Teacher: Sometimes, a person may be born a female and look like a female, but they feel like they should be male. In this case, this athlete identifies as a male and wants to eventually live his life as male?

Student A: So why would he want to be on the women's team?

Teacher: I know it's hard to understand at first, but his body is still female. So physically he is most competitive with other females. Also, he wants to continue playing with his teammates who are probably some of his best friends.

Student B: Hmm, it still seems strange.

Teacher: Think about it from his perspective. It feels natural for him to look like a male and live as a male. He's just being himself and his coach and teammates are supporting him. I think it's pretty cool that the team is so good to him.

Conversation 2

Student A: I just don't get it. How can you not know if you are a boy or girl?

Student B: Yeah, sex testing Caster Semenya seems bizarre.

Student A: You'd think in the locker room it would be obvious if she was a she or a he.

Coach: It's actually more complex than that. Some people are intersex—they are born with both male and female characteristics.

Student A: Still, how can you not know?

Coach: Well it's different for every individual. For some, the differences might be outside their body and visible to the naked eye, but for someone who is intersex like Semenya, the differences are internal. If she had never been asked to undergo a sex test she might never have known.

Student B: But why did she have to be sex tested?

Student A: Because she looks like a man.

Coach: That's not exactly why she got tested.

Student A: But that's what the article said.

Coach: Some people think that if you don't look feminine enough, then you have an advantage that makes you a better athlete. That's why she was tested.

Student B: So what is she?

Coach: She is female. And any so-called advantage is really no different than being taller than your teammates. It's just something someone is born with.

Conversation 3

Student A: He's a guy. A guy shouldn't be playing against girls in any sport. There's a separate tee box for dudes.

Student B: It's gross, and it's cheating.

Student A: He should be kicked out of every golf association.

Coach: Are you all talking about the golfer Lucy Lawless?

Student A: Yeah.

Student B: He should be playing against boys. It's not fair—he's bigger, stronger, and is built to win.

Coach: Lawless isn't cheating. She has undergone surgery and hormone treatments; that's what makes her a transsexual. She *isn't* a man, she's a woman.

Student B: I don't get it. You can't just change how you were born.

Coach: But you can.

Student A: Hold on, Coach; you can't just pretend like he wasn't stronger and able to hit the ball farther. He's got more upper-body strength than women golfers.

Coach: When you start taking hormones, your body physically changes. Your muscles, bones, and fat are more like the sex you're trying to become. So Lawless isn't cheating. She can play with and against the girls.

Student A: So he...I mean she is...

Coach: A great competitor.

genderqueer individuals—a unique but not unnatural, or infrequent yet plausible, combination of attributes.

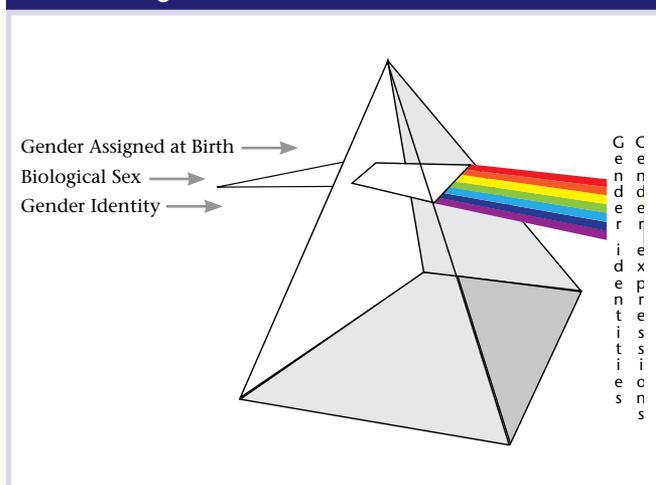
What is important to emphasize is that there is no single way to be transgender; a wide range of gender identities and gender expressions can develop. Ultimately, transgender is an identity; it reflects a person's sense of self (gender identity) and may be revealed via gender expression. It is complex and there are countless permutations of gender, sex, identity, and expression. As such, it is best to allow transgender individuals to identify themselves in the language with which they are most comfortable. These variations in gender identities and expressions, as well as issues related to transitioning, are likely to be the most puzzling for students. Understanding the terms related to gender identity and expression, and how they may influence sport participation, will provide a foundation for engaging in discussion with students about transgender athletes.

Demystifying Transgender Athletes

When issues surrounding transgender and intersex athletes receive media attention, they often are sensationalized in a way that could produce misperceptions. As students read these stories, they are likely to encounter concepts they do not understand or may find biased or inaccurate information. This section focuses on some of the misconceptions that may be caused by misleading media coverage and attempts to demystify transgender experiences. Two primary notions tend to confound people's understanding about transgender and intersex athletes: (1) that all athletes should neatly fall into a gender category and (2) that transgender and intersex athletes have an unfair advantage in sport (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011).

In the case of athletes like Kye Allums, students may question why someone who appears male and identifies as male would want to remain on a female team. This is where it is important to distinguish between making physical changes to one's body versus changing (or being more open about) gender identity. For example, athletes who have been competing as female and who have not taken hormones or surgically changed their body are still physically female. Very likely this will be the case with transgender athletes at the high school or college level. Like Allums, athletes this age or younger may decide to be true to their gender identity and change their appearance and name. Yet, if their body is still physically female, most sport rules allow for them to continue competing with females. The only reason for their exclusion would be ignorance or discrimination. Now, one may question why a male-identified athlete would want to be on a female team. There are many possible answers to this question. For example, socially, if the athlete has been on this team for a while and the teammates are his friends who are supportive of his gender identity, he may want to continue playing with them. Also, females on average are smaller and not as strong as males, so physically this athlete may not fit into a male team. Some people suggest that all athletes should be allowed to compete in the sex category consistent

Figure 1. The Sex-Gender Prism



with their gender identity. In fact, this is the policy in the state of Washington for all high school athletes (Washington Interscholastic Activities Association, 2009).

Much of the bias against transgender and intersex athletes is grounded in the presumption that they appear too masculine if they are female or too feminine if they are male. Basing eligibility standards on appearance is akin to excluding athletes based on their race or religion. This simply would not happen. Yet gender-nonconforming athletes often face bullying by peers and lack of assistance or support from adults (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; Young & Sweeting, 2004). When students raise questions about the outward appearance of transgender athletes, the students can be challenged to reframe how they think about gender-nonconforming individuals (see conversation 1 in table 1). Consider how athletes who decide to be true to their gender identity and who are open about their nonconformity are treated. These athletes knowingly defy social norms, realizing that they will likely face negative consequences from peers and others. Stated another way, these athletes are willing to face adversity, learn how to cope under difficult circumstances, and are resilient. Is this not the type of person one would want as a teammate?

Another common concern, particularly in girls' and women's sport, is that athletes who appear too masculine have an unfair advantage. Much of the sensationalism about Caster Semenya was based on her so-called masculine appearance. In part, because she was very muscular, she was accused of not being female, so the concern was that she had an unfair advantage over female athletes who appeared more feminine. Often ignored in this dialogue is how much variation there is among different physical traits that can provide advantages or disadvantages to athletes. Consider the influence of height in basketball; no one says that the tallest players have an unfair advantage and should be disqualified. Michael Phelps is said to have exceptionally long arms and big feet, a physical advantage linked to his great success as a swimmer. Again, no one considers this unfair.

So, if some female athletes happen to be born with higher testosterone levels than others, why is this considered unfair? Information leaked to the press suggested that Semenya had testosterone levels higher than average for a female (Farquhar, 2009), yet these levels still were far below the average levels for males (leaked reports revealed her testosterone levels were three times higher than average for a woman, yet still three times lower than for an average male; Cooper, 2010). Conversations with students could address the issue of how to determine which naturally occurring physical differences are unfair, and why characteristics linked to sex and gender lead to questions of fairness while other physical differences do not (see conversation 2 in table 1).

News stories about the LPGA and transsexual golfers raise another set of issues related to individuals who have surgically altered their body so that their sex matches their gender identity. Unlike some transgender people, individuals who are transsexual have undergone sex reassignment surgery and may be referred to as male-to-female (MTF; a male body changed to have female physicality) or female-to-male (FTM; a female body changed to have male physicality). Again, concerns about fair play prevail when transsexual females want to compete with other females (see conversation 3 in table 1). The misconception is that female transsexual athletes retain the physical strength of their previously male body. This myth is not supported by medical facts. A transitioning MTF athlete's body undergoes enormous change as testosterone levels are reduced and female hormones are introduced. Within one year, testosterone levels drop to levels consistent with a female body, muscle mass decreases, body fat is redistributed in female patterns, bone density is reduced, and body composition changes (Elbers et al., 1999; Gooren & Bunck, 2004; Lapauw et al., 2008). All of these changes have led researchers to conclude that MTF transsexual athletes can compete against other female athletes without a physiological advantage (Ljungqvist & Genel, 2005). Presumably, an understanding of these facts led the LPGA to change its rules in order to allow female transsexual athletes to compete on tour. No longer do the rules state that only golfers who were "female at birth" (wording used to exclude transsexual athletes) are eligible to compete.

A related misconception focuses on the testosterone therapies prescribed to FTM athletes. The foundation for questioning the inclusion of male transsexual athletes is the perception that they are doping. That is, male-born athletes sometimes take supplemental hormones (or steroids) to increase testosterone levels and gain additional muscle mass, increased strength, and decreased recovery time. Using steroids or exogenous testosterone (e.g., from outside the body through pills or shots) is illegal in sport and is considered unfair. However, for transsexual athletes, medical research supports that testosterone therapy maintains their testosterone levels consistent with average male levels (Bhasin et al., 2001). In other words, testosterone may boost performance, but only to the level of an average man, not to the level of a male using steroids or additional testosterone

illicitly. Considering that testosterone is a banned substance in sport, the levels provided for transsexual athletes are highly monitored and regulated and will not provide FTM athletes with a competitive edge.

What the MTF and FTM hormone misperceptions reveal is two sides of the same coin: the presumption that all males have an innate advantage in sport related to testosterone. The concerns are that MTF athletes might retain some of the physical differences that give them an advantage in sport and that FTM athletes will be able to drastically improve their performance by using a performance-enhancing hormone. Medical research soundly debunks these concerns. Post-operative transsexuals are physiologically and hormonally closer to the gender they identify with than to the sex into which they were born. Hormone treatments are meant to help people's body change to be consistent with their gender identity. The ghost of the person's previous physiological and physical anatomy is just that, in the past; thus MTF and FTM athletes do not have a competitive advantage in sport.

Conclusion

Particularly noteworthy in all of the myths about intersex, transgender, and transsexual athletes is the concern for "normal" athletes and for maintaining a level playing field. What is missing from these conversations is a concern for the intersex, transgender, and transsexual athletes. Imagine what can be gained by reframing this discussion and encouraging inclusion and compassion. An important part of sport is learning to be a "team player," which can include valuing and supporting diverse teammates. While sport often reinforces traditional notions of gender and gendered expectations, it also can be a place for transformation and growth. Talking about transgender and intersex athletes, such as when they are in the news, will reduce the mystery surrounding them. Casually pointing out misinformation and providing truthful information can undermine bias and discrimination in a nonthreatening manner. As athletes recognize that they can ask questions and get answers, they likely will become not only more knowledgeable, but more compassionate and supportive of individuals who are different from themselves. The following are some specific suggestions for approaching the topics of transgender and intersex athletes with students:

- Use names and pronouns associated with one's gender identity and gender expression.
- Acknowledge the challenges that transgender athletes face and reframe the discussion to emphasize their strength and courage; consider coping with adversity as being mentally tough.
- Highlight discrimination aimed at transgender and intersex athletes as unacceptable in a compassionate sport setting.
- Include current news stories about transgender and intersex athletes in everyday conversations.
- Ask students if they heard about the stories and encourage them to ask questions.
- Casually correct misinformation or false assumptions.

- Gently challenge students when they voice negative or stereotyped opinions.

- Emphasize that supporting diverse teammates is part of being a team player (Griffin & Carroll, 2010; Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011).

Conversations about transgender athletes are evolving as rules, regulations, and expectations for athletic inclusion are being revisited. Sincere dialogue about transgender and intersex athletes in the news will lay the foundation for tolerance, should an athlete with nonconforming gender expression join the team. Engaging in conversations and respectfully challenging students who have negative or stereotyped reactions to the news stories will help to normalize diverse gender identities. That is, the subject no longer remains scandalous or shocking; it becomes a conversation already in progress instead of an unfamiliar topic. Athletes will then perceive that it is okay to bring up and talk about such topics. In this type of sport setting, students who are experiencing gender confusion or who want to be open about their transgender identity will find a safe, supportive space.

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