

“She Shoots, He Scores!”: Transgender Disclosure and the Politics of Women’s Ice Hockey

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This article examines the news coverage of transgender hockey players Harrison Browne and Jessica Platt. Using textual and discourse analysis, I explore the dominant themes present in this coverage and how they represent both Browne and Platt. A key finding is that the disclosures of Browne and Platt are informed by and inform the gender politics of women’s hockey. I argue that this coverage does not ultimately challenge the problem of gender segregation in sports as both athletes are reinscribed into the gender binary. However, the coverage represents a potential paradigm shift in how to humanize and empower transgender people when our bodies are talked about in public discourse. Exploratory and balanced news coverage offers a much better way forward than demonizing transgender athletes who are just trying to compete.

Keywords: transgender, athletes, women’s hockey, representation

We find ourselves at a historical moment where transgender, nonbinary, and women athletes are being scrutinized in often monstrous ways. The news coverage of these athletes has come to a vicious point where transwomen such as swimmer Lia Thomas are consistently and loudly dehumanized. Although Lia Thomas also raced against transgender man Iszac Henig at the 2022 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) women’s swimming championships, there has been almost no mention of him in the news coverage. This intense and negative focus on transgender women athletes and relative silence on transgender men is common. However, the news coverage of ice hockey players Harrison Browne and Jessica Platt shifted the paradigm on how competitive transgender athletes are and can be represented in more complex ways. This article thus examines this shift in the coverage of transgender athletes to offer better ways of representing transgender athletes in the media. Through an analysis of the news coverage surrounding Browne and Platt, I explore how transgender bodies in sports are disciplined by gendered discourses, and the complex ways these two athletes are represented in news coverage.

Canadian Harrison Browne played forward during his time in the National Women’s Hockey League (NWHL). While playing on the women’s team as a transgender man, he helped his team secure the championship twice by winning the league’s Isobel Cup. He has since retired from playing hockey professionally and now spends his time focusing on his acting career. Fellow Canadian Jessica Platt played in the Canadian Women’s Hockey League as the league’s first transgender woman before it

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folded.¹ While Platt played men's minor hockey when she was younger, she stopped playing and returned to the ice years later to play in the CWHL. Browne and Platt's public disclosures about being transgender and the reactions that follow highlight two key points: first, that more complex (and less dehumanizing) coverage of transgender athletes is possible, and second, that their disclosures are impacted by the politics specific to women's hockey. This work thus critically engages with the current state of transgender participation in North American ice hockey as exemplified by news coverage of these two players. While these stories suggest there is hope toward more equitable access in sports for transgender people, the dehumanizing and violent conversations around this topic need to be continually interrogated until transgender people can safely and meaningfully participate in sports.

Browne's disclosure that he was a transgender man on October 7, 2016, proved to be a big media event, sparking conversations around what Browne playing as a transgender man in a women's hockey league would mean for other trans athletes. Similarly, Platt used her personal Instagram account to come out on January 10, 2018. Her disclosure was picked up in various news and sports channels to a lesser degree than Browne's story. Different news organizations and sports channels, such as ESPN and Sportsnet, picked up the story quickly, and it was circulated widely. As this research will explore, these conversations sparked important questions about gender segregation in sports, league policies, and the way transgender athletes do and do not fit into the world of sex-segregated sports.

Through textual and discourse analysis, I examine how news coverage of Browne and Platt reveals a broader set of harmful gendered discourses surrounding transgender athletes and the politics of women's hockey. This research explores the following questions: Who gets to speak on Browne and Platt's experience? How is their disclosure framed? What dominant themes are present? And what is it about women's hockey that makes it conducive to transgender hockey players being able to continue to play as openly transgender? In what follows, I explore the connection between hockey and gender performance while examining the role that gender segregation plays in sports. Then, I explore the politics of women's hockey and the different constraints that women athletes face. After providing that context, I return to the dominant themes evident in the news articles. These dominant themes include exploring their gender experience in the sport, the deployment of birthnames, league policies, omitting men's hockey, and the Team Trans initiative. While the courageous act of disclosing themselves as transgender positions Platt and Browne as "possibility models" (Mock, 2014) or extends the range of what is possible for trans people to do, this coverage and the treatment of the players do not challenge the harm gender performances and segregation in sports do in the first place.

¹ The Canadian Women's Hockey League, founded in 2007, had a total of 12 teams over its 12 years of operation. The league featured many Olympic and high-performance athletes in the United States and Canada. While coexisting with rival leagues like the National Women's Hockey League for a time, financial funding issues lead to its shut down in May of 2019 ("Canadian Women's Hockey League," 2021).

Gendered Performances and Gender Segregation

The news coverage of these athletes is impacted by gender segregation in sports and the different ways athletes are expected to perform according to their gender. Sports are therefore bounded by the gendered performances that are encouraged by cultural, social, and political institutions, as well as the gender segregation that divides sporting categories into men's sports and women's sports. In this section, I outline how gendered performance and gender segregation in sport structure and harm all athletes, but especially transgender athletes. This impacts the way transgender athletes are talked about in news discourses.

Ice hockey is strongly connected to the bodily performance of gender according to certain expectations. In other words, men hockey players are expected to act tough, while women hockey players are supposed to be less physical and thus taken less seriously. From a young age, players are quickly divided into men's and women's divisions, and the sport itself is linked to a particular performance of toxic masculinity. The performance of toxic masculinity is often tied to aggression, violence, and harmful conduct in men's sports. Violence in sports can take the form of actual or threatened bodily aggression toward others, such as physically striking or body checking another person, or using objects like a hockey stick to do so. It can also include verbal aggression, such as taunting or using slurs. Fighting and hard body checks are thus a crucial component of men's hockey. As Messner (1990) argues, men's sports construct a situation where athletes are expected to use their own bodies as weapons to destroy their opponents (p. 203). Importantly, Messner (1992) views the world of sports as a social institution and masculinity as socially constructed (p. 8). This demonstrates how gender performance in sports is not natural or inevitable, but socially constructed.

The gendered performance of men's hockey is structured around this imperative to be willing to enact violence. Violence and its positive reception by fans are markers of men's hockey. Messner (1992) attributes this to historical means of keeping the male body elevated and superior with violence (p. 15). It follows that this physically demanding game rewards traits such as domination over opponents, competitiveness, strength, and a willingness to inflict and receive pain. However, violence in women's hockey is harshly punished. For example, body checking is allowed in certain competitive men's divisions of hockey such as the National Hockey League (NHL) and Junior hockey leagues. In comparison, body checking is illegal in all levels of women's hockey. Messner (1992) notes that ice hockey is a gendered institution structured by men, and women's hockey has consequently been historically diminished and relegated to the sidelines (p. 16). Namely, there is far less funding, advertising, and airtime given to women's games. Ultimately, it is considered less serious, less worthy of attention, and less entertaining than men's hockey. Importantly, the dominant belief that men's bodies are superior in sport illuminates why there is such an intense focus on the bodies of transgender women. Transgender women are not men, but fears around their inclusion in women's sports point to the mistaken belief that their bodies retain this imagined masculine superiority in sport.

This gendered discourse is also influenced by the common imperative to separate sports divisions by binary gender, or into men's and women's sports. Gender segregation in sport is often treated as natural and the only way to ensure "fairness" in competition. Continuing to uphold this logic harms all athletes

because it prevents us from imagining sports being performed any other way. In other words, it prevents us from imagining what more equitable sports could look like. The rhetoric of "fair" competition is further propelled by the fact that women are a protected class of athletes. Pieper (2016) argues that fair play discourse is problematic because (1), "genetic and physiological equality" does not exist in sports, and (2) the "presumed need to protect women athletes degrade[s] female athleticism and reaffirm[s] a belief in male physical superiority" (pp. 7–8). Similarly, Leong (2018) asserts that the "assumption that men and women cannot compete against one another is either false or unproven" (p. 1264). This context is important for understanding the reactions toward transgender athletes, depending on whether they are transgender women or transgender men, when they compete in women's sports. As Messner (1992) explores,

sex-segregated activities such as organized sport . . . provide a context in which gendered identities and separate 'gendered cultures' develop and come to appear natural . . . gender-marked moments seem to express core truths: that boys and girls are separate and fundamentally different. (p. 31)

The combination of its enduring persistence and the false belief that men are naturally athletically superior makes this gender division seem desirable and inevitable. In short, men's bodies are believed to have superior sporting abilities by virtue of their biology. An important aspect of this belief is the impact that testosterone is thought to have on athletic performance, which I discuss next.

Testosterone: An Emphasis on Hormones

Testosterone is believed to be a powerful performance-enhancing hormone belonging exclusively to men. However, there is a lack of convincing evidence that hormone levels have a strong impact on athletic performance or that they are a good indicator of "fairness" in competition. As Jordan-Young and Karkazis (2019) note, testosterone is "summoned up in daily conversation and news reports in a way that most often reinforces its identity as the so-called male sex hormone, while the complexity and nuance of its many actions get short shrift" (p. 1). While testosterone is lauded as the primary hormone of men, estrogen is believed to be the primary hormone of women (Jordan-Young & Karkazis, 2019, p. 10). Even though everyone possesses a mix of hormones, believing that women have only estrogen and men have only testosterone bolsters the idea that there are only men and male bodies, and women and female bodies. Jordan-Young and Karkazis (2019) argue that "the ubiquitous and commonsense notion of T as an overwhelming 'super substance' not only substitutes for evidence but also sometimes makes any call for concrete, empirical details about what T actually does seem puzzling or obtuse" (p. 10). Any reasonable argument that contradicts this claim that testosterone is associated with superior athletic performance is quickly countered by this powerful discourse around T as a "super substance" belonging to the domain of male bodies.

Importantly, the science of hormonal advantages is inconclusive and often leads to problematic outcomes, like barring athletes from competing. It also leads to invasive gender testing, such as what athlete Castor Semenya has had to go through. As Karkazis and Jordan-Young (2018) discuss, Semenya is the "world's most scrutinized and violated athlete despite having done nothing wrong" (p. 2). Her experience repeatedly being violated, harassed, and barred from competing in various events is a direct result of the

belief that testosterone levels give athletes an advantage. Transgender women, as well as Black and Brown women and those from the Global South, have historically been at the mercy of inconclusive hormone policies. There is infinite harm in the policing of hormone levels in competitive sports, not only to transgender people but to other athletes as well, especially Black women and other women who do not fall within the artificially prescribed "proper range." And it still does not ensure that athlete competition is fair. Ensuring that there is fairness in competition is much more prevalent in women's sports, while there is much less focus on ensuring fair play in men's sports. I explore the politics of women's hockey next, as influenced by these ideas of fairness, to explicate how women athletes are treated differently than men.

The Politics of Women's Hockey

The paternalistic notion that women athletes must be protected often occurs when transgender women attempt to participate, and this reveals how deeply embedded a belief in men's sporting superiority is. Fischer and McClearen (2020) argue that "most of the sport world assumes that trans women have physiological and biological advantages over cis women" (p. 150). There continue to be vicious debates about the inclusion of transgender women in sports, mostly concerning the transphobic argument that transgender women retain their masculine physicality. Important examples of this include the cases of Thomas and former MMA fighter Fallon Fox who was forcibly outed as transgender and then prevented from competing further (Fischer & McClearen, 2020). The thought that transgender people compete with unfair advantages is based on "ignorance about transitioning and gender normativity biases" (Teetzel, 2017, p. 70; Wahlert & Fiester, 2012). Dominant discourses about male physical superiority encourage us to wrongly believe that transgender women compete with unfair advantages and that transgender men would never be capable of competing among cisgender men. According to Fischer and McClearen (2020), the latest International Olympic Committee policies allow transgender men to compete in the male category with no restrictions because of the "cissexist assumption that trans men will never be 'as good' as cisgender men" (p. 151). This disparity is rooted in the apparent link between bodily constellations that equate male bodies with physiological and biological advantages, such as increased strength and muscle mass.

It is important to note that many debates around the inclusion or exclusion of transgender athletes occur when they participate in women's high-performance sports. In comparison to the focus on brutality and physical dominance in men's hockey, women's hockey is often about finesse and skill as they must develop their game to work around not being able to body check an opponent off the puck. As Oliver (2020) explains, "without being able to bodycheck to neutralize an opponent or create a turnover, there is a much more cerebral, tactical approach to women's hockey that you do not find in other sports," (para. 3) including an emphasis on speed and playmaking. Gender segregation, the gendered discourses that divide men's athletes from women's athletes, and the different ways transgender women and transgender men are represented impact how athletes like Browne and Platt are talked about in the news. News articles about the disclosures of Browne and Platt serve as a useful avenue to look at the discourse surrounding transgender hockey players and the politics of women's hockey because they represent a balance of sharing the athletes' stories while being neither fully celebratory nor openly hostile. Cohen and Semerjian (2008) find that athletes must exist as men or women and become "reified into one category answering the question: 'what is s/he?'" (p. 139). Even when athletes such as Platt and Browne are allowed to play in women's leagues, the policies that these leagues enact reaffirm sex-based divisions of sports and treat

women's sports as a protected, and still inferior, class through the privileging of hormone levels. The news articles analyzed in this work attempt to make sense of Browne and Platt as gendered athletes competing in women's leagues at the time of their disclosure.

Method

I used a combination of textual and discourse analysis on 32 North American news articles to examine the dominant discourse that threads its way through this coverage. Capuzza (2016) argues that journalistic practices both "accommodate and contain transgender identity and expression" while also having the potential to influence how people understand others, as well as concepts like gender as a "set of power relations" (p. 83). The stories explored in these news articles act as discourse that explore how these athletes fit, and do not fit, into women's hockey. Foucault (1990) notes that discourse itself can be "an instrument and an effect of power" as well as a starting point of resistance (p. 101). News discourse plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions about trans people, especially if readers do not know any transgender people personally. On one hand, this coverage combats symbolic annihilation by allowing transgender athletes to be seen and to tell their stories (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). On the other hand, this coverage can do both direct and indirect harm through its discourse. In summary, this research understands news media to have discursive power in shaping the story around how transgender people can be included in sports.

The sample of articles was retrieved from Nexis Uni using the following inclusion parameters: search terms "Harrison Browne" and "women's hockey" or "Jessica Platt" and "women's hockey." The parameters were further narrowed to the date range 2016–2020 and in North America, with duplicates being removed. All 32 articles were published in 2016–2020 in North America, where coverage predominantly occurred, and discuss Browne and/or Platt, their identity as transgender hockey players, and the field of women's hockey in relation to their disclosures. These articles generally balance journalistic narrative with quotes from the athletes themselves to explore their experience as transgender athletes. The news outlets that produced these pieces range from bigger organizations like *The New York Times*, *The Toronto Star*, and *The Associated Press* to smaller news outlets like *The Bangor Daily News*.

I used discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2008) to understand how language in the news articles is being used to frame the experiences of Browne and Platt. Linking the actual words and phrases to the wider social context allowed me to see how both athletes are being constructed, or presented, as transgender athletes competing in women's sports. Additionally, I looked for commonly occurring and important themes and patterns in the discourse itself, using my research questions as a framework. Studying the discourse in the sample helped me answer how the athletes and their disclosures were being framed in the news articles. In addition to discourse analysis, I used textual analysis (McKee, 2003) to interpret the larger cultural assumptions around transgender identity, women's sports, and other related content included in the sample.

After selecting the sample, I read through the articles in multiple passes using an open coding system to examine important and reoccurring themes, paying attention to the language, terms, and phrases used by both the athletes and the reports to frame their discussions. Guided by my research questions, I continued to qualitatively code short phrases and individual words, as well as the discourse present in the story itself. Dominant themes arising from the textual and discourse analysis coding process explained how

and why these two athletes were being discussed and positioned in certain ways throughout these news articles. As a transgender man who has played both men's and women's hockey, the complex experiences of both athletes are important and familiar. My own subjectivity in this analysis allows me to intimately understand the discourse that surrounds these athletes who are just trying to compete in sports.

Analysis

An analysis of these articles revealed that the coverage attempts to be respectful of Browne and Platt and allows them to tell their story in some ways. However, the result of this coverage is that transgender athletes are still repackaged to either fit within a gender segregated sports system, or they must cease competing. Their disclosures serve as important discourse because both athletes have chosen to be vocal about their struggles as trans athletes. In turn, this paves the way for other trans athletes to fight for their right to play competitive sports. In my analysis, I found the following key themes: gender experience, the deployment of birthnames, league policies, the omission of men's hockey, and the Team Trans initiative. I explore each theme in turn before concluding with a wider call to action when representing trans folks in news media.

The Gender Experience

These articles depend on a medically based understanding of gender transition, where a transgender person is believed to be born as one gender and "becomes" the other one. This understanding of the transgender experience erases the complex and diverse nature of individual transgender identity. In this sample, 13 articles aim to describe Browne's transition in medical terms by emphasizing surgical and hormonal interventions. For example, articles discuss how Browne did not go "further to alter his gender" (Reddekopp, 2016, para. 7) while playing hockey professionally and that his goals were to medically "transition to being a man" (Wawrow, 2016a, para. 3, 2016b, para. 6), plan to "undergo sex reassignment" (Kois, 2016, para. 10), and "transition medically" (McLaughlin, 2017). Phrasing Browne's planned journey like this problematically makes it sound like he will "become" a man through surgery and hormonal therapy, instead of just acknowledging that he is a man already. It is clear in the narratives woven throughout these articles that Browne's professional career in women's hockey mattered a lot as he chose to "delay a physical transition until after his hockey career has ended" (Brait, 2016, para. 7; Higgins, 2016a, para. 16) and held off on hormone therapy to return and play one more season (Levine, 2018). The discourse in these articles suggests that he is still permitted to play because he is still considered "female-bodied," and his history with the sport allows him to play even after disclosing that he is a transgender man.

In comparison, seven articles explore Platt's medical transition by stating that she completed her medical transition in 2012 (Cicerella, 2018; Morden, 2018; Radford, 2018) and that she takes "hormone replacement therapy to identify as female" (Cicerella, 2018, para. 8; Morden, 2018, para. 11). Other articles also note that she has had "sex-reassignment surgery" (Brady, 2018, para. 30). Another focus of three articles is to scrutinize Platt's physical characteristics. Brady (2018) describes her as a "5-foot-8, 155-pound player [that] was average size for this league . . . her skills didn't stand out above others" (para. 6). Additionally, Brady (2018) explores how her muscles have gotten smaller and she has had to work out much harder after starting hormone replacement therapy. This focus on Platt's body and hormone levels connect to larger cultural battles over the right for transgender women to compete in women's sports. Platt argues that

whenever a trans woman excels in a sport they may look to . . . (high testosterone) to explain why the athlete excels instead of giving credit where it is due and realizing it is because of her training and hard work. (Vikander, 2019, para. 11)

As I explored above, testosterone levels are often weaponized against women athletes in general and to prevent transgender women from competing specifically. Despite a lack of evidence that trans athletes hold any advantage (Ziegler & Huntley, 2013, p. 476), the belief persists that testosterone levels are unilaterally responsible for athletic success. Platt asserts the

effects that the hormones have on you, it's not just going to go back overnight . . . if we have a trans woman who's been transitioning enough and is eligible to play on the women's team . . . her strength is going to be less than a male counterpart who's training as well. (Radford, 2018, para. 7)

The focus on Platt's physical body and hormone level creates a discourse where Platt is proven to be "physiologically equivalent" to cisgender women.

The coverage of Browne's gender journey seems to be more about curiosity than a fear that he will outperform the women he plays against. In contrast, the articles have an explicit focus on Platt's hormone level and physical stature as a way of pacifying fears about her outperforming the women she plays against. The difference in focus showcases how deeply embedded the myths around testosterone and its connection to athletic performance are. It also reveals the transphobic and sexist assumptions that men automatically outperform women in sports and that the discourse around Browne and Platt is biologically essentialist in nature. However, this coverage does not demonize Browne or Platt or suggest that they should not be competing. Instead, it attempts to make people reading these stories understand the gender experience that both athletes have gone through.

The Deployment of Birthnames

Another major theme in the news articles was the way birthnames are used in this coverage. A total of 12 articles violently misgender Browne by using his birthname in describing his experience. For example, Wawrow (2016a) notes that Browne played "professional and college ranks as a woman under the name [redacted]"² (para. 2). Browne states that he did not feel like himself when he would "be announced as his birthname or they'd be saying 'she' had a good game, 'she' scored this many goals" (Reddekopp, 2016, para. 8). He also describes how the use of his birthname was a weight (Brait, 2016) and that he was "identifying less and less with his birth name and female gender" (Reddekopp, 2016, para. 3). This consistent link to Browne's past places his athletic experience in the realm of women's hockey. Deploying Browne's birthname is a constant reminder of his past as a "woman" athlete. He is still allowed to play women's hockey professionally if he retains his assigned-female-at-birth body without starting hormones. One of the problems with this discourse is that it forces transgender athletes back into a binary box if they want to play competitive sports. Instead of challenging sports to become more inclusive, it forces these

² Out of respect for Browne, his birthname has been redacted.

athletes to choose between transitioning and playing hockey. In contrast, Platt's birthname is not mentioned at all. While her experience with boy's hockey is briefly mentioned, she is not deadnamed.³

Hockey League Transgender Policies

A key factor in this conversation are the league policies that influence how transgender athletes can be included in sports. On the one hand, these policies importantly enshrine some sort of protection for transgender athletes and allow their participation. On the other hand, they constrain how transgender people can and cannot exist in the world while also competing. For example, league policies dictate what kind of surgeries and hormone replacement schedules athletes must maintain to be eligible for play. In this section, I will detail the way league policies are included in the discourse about Platt and Browne.

The articles in this sample explore how the CWHL and NWHL, respectively, handled policy concerning their two active transgender players. It is important to note that transgender men and women are treated much differently in these policies. For example, the NCAA's 2011 "Inclusion of Transgender Student-Athletes" allow transgender men to continue to play on women's teams without changing the team status to a mixed team if they do not take testosterone (Cunningham, Buzuvis, & Mosier, 2018, p. 368). In comparison, this same policy requires transgender women to

complete one calendar year of testosterone-suppression treatment prior to being able to join a women's team without turning it to a mixed team . . . transgender women may continue to compete on a men's team after beginning testosterone suppression and/or estrogen treatment. (Cunningham et al., 2018, p. 368)

This sample also reflects policies that are similar in nature to the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) emphasis on hormone levels. Clearly, these policies indicate how testosterone is viewed as integral to superior athletic performance and mistakenly tied to certain body and gender constellations.

The CWHL already had an inclusive policy in place to protect players regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, but only if they fell within a prescribed hormonal range. In comparison, the NWHL created a transgender policy after Browne's disclosure. In deciding how to address the situation, the NWHL chose to support Browne by changing his name and pronouns in their system (Higgins, 2016b). Some articles in this sample also explore how the NWHL "developed a policy with the stated purpose of supporting athletes choosing to express their gender beyond the binary of female and male" (Brait, 2016, para. 5; Higgins, 2017, para. 13; Wawrow, 2016a, para. 5). The discourse that transgender athletes are "choosing" to express their gender beyond the binary is problematic, equating transitioning as a personal choice while still maintaining the gender binary as a normative baseline. These policies thus allow for transgender people to play under certain circumstances, but athletes must make major decisions concerning their transitions to do so. Specifically, transgender men must refrain from undergoing hormone replacement therapy and other possibly desired gender-affirming procedures to abide by league policies. Transgender women must be

³ The term "deadnaming" refers to using a transgender person's birthname.

continually policed around testosterone levels while combatting the idea that their success in sporting endeavors is owed to their potential hormone levels. Problematically, nonbinary and gender-nonconforming athletes do not even seem to exist in terms of these policies. Ultimately, these policies mark transgender athletes as "other" and attempt to force them back into a gender-binary system built around gender segregation in sports. Complicating the situation is that these policies are one of the best ways to currently ensure that transgender athletes can compete.

Major issues that arise in these inclusion policies are their complex understanding of fairness and their limited understanding of gender. Higgins (2016b) says the goal is to "create a policy on transgender players that respects the rights of athletes and concerns about fair play" (para. 8). Much of the concern around fair play is more about transgender women who are believed to have inherent biological advantages over cisgender women. Consequently, Higgins (2016b) states that the "most restrictive conditions relate to those who make a transition from male to female" (para. 11). It makes sense why coverage about Platt concentrates so heavily on her medical transition and hormone levels. In terms of how this policy relates to Browne, Levine (2018) notes that the "doping policy in professional hockey would not allow Browne to take the amount of testosterone necessary to begin his transition" (para. 5). Although the creation of policies to support transgender athletes like Browne and Platt is important to protect their ability to play, their deployment is complex as it is still based in a binary understanding of male/female. These policies ultimately force transgender athletes to make key decisions around their bodies and transition journeys, limiting their autonomy based on scientific evidence around hormone levels and fairness that, as we have seen, is shaky at best. If an athlete chooses to seek gender-affirming care that puts them in violation of these policies, they must sacrifice playing competitively while also potentially impacting their professional life and ability to make a living.

While these policies are a start, more positive and inclusive policies can combat these negative outcomes. An important step toward more inclusive policies is to reevaluate what "fairness" in sport entails instead of perpetuating sexist myths that women athletes need "protecting" and that high levels of testosterone are responsible for athletic success. Instead, policies should protect transgender athletes through enshrining their inclusion. One important aspect of transgender inclusion is that men's hockey is never considered or discussed as a place where transgender players can or do play. I turn to this important omission in the discourse next.

A Glaring Omission: Men's Hockey

As I discussed previously, men's sports and bodies are consistently upheld as superior. In comparison, women's sports are relegated to the sidelines and diminished as less serious than "real" (read: men's) sports. Interestingly, any mention of men's hockey is absent from both Platt and Browne's accounts. While Platt's history in boys' hockey is briefly mentioned, the news coverage of Browne works to tie him to his history as an athlete competing in women's hockey. For example, he is tied to his minor league-playing days via his description as a former Oakville player ("Former Oakville Player," 2016) and as a "former University of Maine women's hockey standout" (McLaughlin, 2016, para. 1). Browne is not just an athlete; he has a history in women's hockey that is distanced from men's hockey. In comparison, three articles mention Platt's experience playing boys' hockey (Brady, 2018; "Bright Grove Native Jessica

Platt," 2018; Cicerella, 2018). While boys' hockey is separated from men's hockey because of the brutality that increases as boys get older (Messner, 1992), one important point exists in Platt's coverage that remains unmentioned in Browne's. Importantly, Brady (2018) describes how Platt's interests were different than other boys and that there was "a lack of comfort within the atmosphere of boys' hockey, especially within the bro culture of the dressing room" (para. 13). Boys' hockey is set aside as incompatible with women's hockey and Platt's experience.

In contrast to men's hockey, the seemingly open nature of women's sports is constructed as allowing diversity to flourish instead of driving it out. This difference aligns with how sports, and especially physical sports, are constructed around toxic masculinity as tied to aggression, violence, and harm. As I argued previously, men's hockey is structured around the imperative to be willing to enact violence. There is, therefore, less risk of being brutalized by an opponent in women's sports, especially because of transphobia. Theoretically, women's sports are less violent, especially toward players with marginalized identities. However, the story seems more complex when contrasted with the way women athletes are scrutinized. There is a much heavier emphasis on policing who is or is not allowed to play women's sports.

There is no mention of the possibility of transgender inclusion in competitive men's hockey throughout the sample. Browne argues that people should be able to play with who they want to, whether that is transgender people, all-men, all-women, or coed teams (Szklański, 2019). As Browne insinuates, the problem with dividing competitive sports into men's and women's divisions is that it leaves a lot of room for athletes to not fit in. By its continued existence, dividing sport into gender-segregated groupings makes it seem as though this is both natural and inevitable (Messner, 1992). It precludes the possibility for sports to be imagined beyond this binary division. The harm of omitting men's hockey as a possibility for trans people to play in is that it further perpetuates the division between men's and women's sports. Although some women's leagues continue to wrestle with how to include their transgender and nonbinary players fairly, others do not engage with the possibility of transgender inclusion at all. As it stands, there is no equivalent wrestling with the inclusion of transgender players in competitive men's hockey leagues. Chris Mosier is a trans athlete who runs a comprehensive website resource on various sports leagues and their trans inclusion policies. Mosier's website states that, "to our knowledge, no men's professional sports leagues have formal policies on the participation of transgender athletes" ("Professional Sports Leagues," n.d., para. 6). What this lack of a formal policy insinuates is that transgender men could not compete with or threaten the dominance of cisgender men in sports at a professional level. Additionally, there is generally less attention paid to transgender men entering men's spaces than transgender women entering women's spaces. There is clearly no parallel concern for "fairness" in men's sports like there is in women's sports. As I have established throughout this article, this lack of concern is rooted in the belief that men's bodies and sports are superior, while women athletes need intervention and protection. In other words, men are just better at sports, and there is no need to police their bodies. Men are allowed to have bodily autonomy, while women are not. Transgender and nonbinary athletes must try to fit into a system that was not designed for them.

Theoretically, transgender participation in men's hockey may be less challenging on a policy and league level. However, the toxic masculinity that exists in men's sports may be enough to give any athlete pause when considering playing there or not. This is especially true as men's hockey is tied to toxic

masculinity and violence, and transgender people already must deal with threats of violence in their day-to-day existence. Aside from the possibility of transgender athletes competing in men's leagues, another opportunity for transgender players to compete arose when Team Trans was created, which was another important theme in the analysis. I explore this important initiative next to illuminate what transgender-centered sports could look like.

Team Trans

The Team Trans initiative is another way of thinking beyond a gender-segregation system in sports. Three articles from this sample focus on Team Trans, a tournament team composed of transgender and gender nonconforming hockey players of various skill from the United States and Canada. This team is a part of a larger organization called Boston Pride Hockey. Both Team Trans and Boston Pride Hockey seek to develop an "inclusive community that provides a safe and welcoming environment for people to learn, enjoy, and compete in the sport they love" ("History," n.d., para. 1). Their website states that

Team Trans is an international collective of hockey players . . . who all happen to identify as trans or gender nonconforming! When we were introduced to ice hockey, most of us did not have the opportunity to play with other out trans/GNC folks. Team Trans and BPH play a different kind of ice hockey, where the goal isn't to win, but to prove that everyone has a place on the ice! (Boston Pride Hockey, n.d., para. 1)

There is no policing of transitions, hormone levels, or questions about locker rooms; the team uses the same dressing room, and they are all transgender, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming.

An important outcome of Platt and Browne's disclosures is that there is more visibility for transgender hockey players. As testimony to how much of an impact both athletes have had on the visibility of transgender hockey players, they served as honorary cocaptains on Team Trans (Szklański, 2019). Allentuck and Sommerfeld (2019) quote Platt as saying that "something like this is really important to bring trans athletes into the conversation . . . because a lot of hatred is being spread around about trans women and sports" (para. 23). Importantly, this tournament team was a safe space of camaraderie and intimate understanding of the struggles that come with being a trans athlete. For instance, one player noted how there was

no stress about locker room situations . . . we all have different scars and different life experiences and stuff like that . . . we're all kind of hiding things, usually in one way or another, when we play with our regular teams. (Szklański, 2019, para. 10)

This trans-only team is one way that transgender athletes could safely play without being forced into a gender-segregated space. However, is building a separate team or a separate trans-only league enough? Although this is an important initiative, I do not believe it solves the harm that gender-segregated sports enact on both trans and cis athletes. Changing sports to be more inclusive spaces would help every athlete, transgender and cisgender alike, because it would also take away the harmful gender policing and scrutiny of women athletes.

By making themselves public figures via their disclosures, Platt and Browne have brought awareness to the issues that transgender athletes face. Additionally, they serve as possibility models for other transgender athletes who want to compete. Allentuck and Sommerfeld (2019) explore the impact watching Team Trans had on a young transgender boy who watched them play:

Sitting a few rows behind the bench was a transgender boy from the Boston area who plays youth hockey . . . As the team walked off the ice . . . One of the players handed the boy a signed puck and promised to send a jersey in the mail. They said they looked forward to the day when he would join them on Team Trans. (para. 46)

The visibility of Platt and Browne's journey has had a deep impact on the hockey world. As Allentuck and Sommerfeld (2019) note, Browne was "larger than life" (para. 32) to the other players on Team Trans because of his public disclosure and the news coverage that followed his story. Platt explains how "for a lot of transgender people you can feel the hostility in the hockey atmosphere because it's still very much a male-dominated sport where anyone who's seen as different is typically made fun of or is an outcast" (Szklański, 2019, para. 21). Although the sports world may not be ready to have a wider conversation about challenging binary gender in sports yet, Browne argues that people should not be "put into so many different boxes and not be allowed to play" (Szklański, 2019, para. 23). Additionally, Szklański (2019) explores how the visibility of Team Trans can importantly "promote education, awareness, and acceptance" (para. 15) for transgender and cisgender athletes. The publicity that Team Trans has received is an important outcome of their public identity as transgender hockey players.

Conclusion: Toward Better Transgender Inclusion

This work has demonstrated how the news coverage of Platt and Browne offers a more complex way of representing transgender athletes by giving them some autonomy to tell their story. Additionally, the news articles in this sample do not dehumanize them or treat them as monsters. Instead, many of these articles explore what the gender experience of being a competitive transgender athlete in women's hockey was like for them. In this way, these news articles offer a paradigm shift toward more equal, if not yet quite celebratory, transgender representation in news media.

Importantly, hockey is structured by gendered discourses and gender segregation in three main ways: (1) testosterone is tied to athletic superiority; (2) men's sports and athletics are superior to women's sports; and (3) these transgender athletes are tied to a "born in the wrong body" medical model of transition, and thus their transgender identities are not truly respected. As West and Zimmerman (1987) argue, "if we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category" (p. 146). The consequence of this discourse is that the binary division in hockey is not challenged, and the logic of gender segregation in sport is reaffirmed through the process of folding these athletes back into a binary understanding of gender.

The problematic options for transgender athletes as it stands are represented by the stories of Platt and Browne: either they medically transition and continually prove their "physiological equivalency" to women and are allowed to continue playing, or they choose to undergo gender-affirming procedures and are forced to

leave women's hockey forever. Even when transgender women follow hormonal and transition policies, they continue to be harassed and dehumanized in general, including in news coverage. As this article discusses, transgender women are seen as a threat to women's sports because they are believed to retain masculine superiority in sports. Comparatively, transgender men are absent, or there is less concern with their inclusion in women's sports if they do not start hormones. Moving forward, league policies could help these transgender athletes compete by enshrining their ability to play. For example, NCAA policies have allowed Thomas to compete in the 2022 NCAA women's swimming championships because she has followed guidance around medical transitioning. Allowing transgender athletes to compete in the first place is a necessary first step. However, athletic leagues need to reconsider that sports from the outset are not fair. Structuring inclusion policies around hormone levels and normative understandings of what men's and women's bodies are harms both transgender and cisgender athletes. If leagues and their policies expanded their understanding of gender identity, biology, and stopped focusing on hormone levels to dictate what is fair, this could challenge the long-entrenched dependency on gender-segregation models in sports. These policies just continue to harm women, transgender, and nonbinary people while ensuring that the toxic masculinity that structures sports remain unchanged. Leagues need to reevaluate their policies toward inclusion of all athletes, and to critically consider what "fair" means in sports where everyone's body constellation is different.

The focus on playing women's hockey competitively combined with the omission of men's hockey in these articles serves to discursively position women's hockey as the only safe avenue for transgender athletes to disclose and compete within. The evidence for this lies in some of the choices both Browne and Platt make in their hockey journey. Browne chose to retire from hockey completely, rather than compete in men's hockey. Platt alludes to the uncomfortable locker room culture of boys' hockey that led to a hiatus for years before returning. Instead, there is the creation of spaces like Team Trans that lay outside of men's or women's hockey. While Team Trans is an example of what inclusive sports spaces could look like, it seems highly problematic to segregate transgender athletes from everyone else. Segregating athletes away from professional sporting opportunities ensures they will not be as successful in terms of accolades or winning championships. More importantly, it is harmful to transgender people to separate them from their peers. Ultimately, it makes it appear as though the current system of sports makes sense and is inevitable. We must imagine what sports could be without the constraints of gender segregation.

Future news coverage of transgender athletes needs to start with treating them as people and centering them in the narrative. The news articles in this sample allow Platt and Browne to tell their story by quoting them, trying to explain that they are just athletes trying to compete, and not being hostile to their inclusion. In many ways, media can set the tone for public conversations that happen around transgender bodies. The important component is that transgender people need to be centered in meaningful ways in this discourse. By centering transgender voices and normalizing the inclusion of transgender athletes in sports, media coverage itself can serve to combat the toxic attitudes toward trans people in general. The coverage of Platt and Brown represents a potential paradigm shift in how to humanize and empower transgender people when our bodies are talked about in public discourse. We must continue to push for the further empowerment of transgender people by centering their voices, pushing for their inclusion in spaces such as sport, and by combatting the toxicity that surrounds transgender inclusion in spaces that cisgender bodies are readily able to exist in. Exploratory and balanced news coverage offers a much better way forward than demonizing transgender athletes who are just trying to compete.

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