

BEYOND THE BINARY

Despite progress made toward the inclusion of transgender and non-binary athletes in high school sports, challenges and stigmas are still prevalent in athletic programs throughout the state.

BY HANAH KITAMOTO
& CAROLINE MASCARDO

DESIGN BY XIAOYI ZHU

In the world of sports, there is no in-between. The ball is either in or out. You make the shot or miss it. You win or lose. Even the way sports teams are categorized is firmly rooted in the binary: boys and girls.

FACING BARRIERS

Since the establishment of girls sports in 1926, state athletic programs have remained separated by boys and girls teams, respectively headed by the Iowa High School Athletic Association and the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union. However, this division can create challenges for athletes who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth. According to state athletic policies, students who identify as transgender may join the team they feel most comfortable on, but many transgender athletes still face obstacles while participating in their sport.

Dexter Hanna '24 started swimming when he was in seventh grade and immediately developed a passion for the sport.

"I just fell in love with it, and I swim as much as I can," Hanna said. "When I heard that you could do school swimming, I was really excited because it's a new way to meet people at school, and I just had to swim more."

Hanna identifies as a transgender male and chooses to swim for the girls team. He believes all students should be allowed to compete on their team of choice, regardless of their gender identity. Under Iowa high school athletic guidelines, when applicable, coaches are recommended to set a gender-neutral dress code that is comfortable for all team members.

"I think that it would be okay to let transgender students compete on the teams of the gender they identify as because ... you don't have to wear a uniform that conforms to gender," Hanna said.

However, for sports like swimming, it can be difficult to enforce a gender-neutral dress code. Hanna occasionally experiences gender dysphoria, a feeling of discomfort that may occur in individuals whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth or sex-related physical

TERMINOLOGY

GENDER IDENTITY (N.): a person's internal sense of gender; may conflict with one's sex assigned at birth.

SEX (N.): the classification of a person as male or female. At birth, infants are assigned a sex, usually based on the appearance of their external anatomy.

GENDER BINARY (N.): the idea that there are only two genders, male and female, imposed by a societal system or cultural beliefs.

GENDER TRANSITION (N.): the process of changing one's gender presentation and/or sex characteristics to match one's internal sense of gender identity.

TRANSGENDER (ADJ.): an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex assigned at birth.

NON-BINARY/GENDERQUEER (ADJ.): terms used by some people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of man and woman.

CISGENDER (ADJ.): a term to describe people who are not transgender.

Source: GLAAD

characteristics.

"It's a little bit uncomfortable to wear a girl's suit with dysphoria; it's just not exactly where I'm supposed to be ... but it's all I've ever been used to, so it's not that bad," Hanna said.

Similarly, Jem Alden '23, who also goes by Jay, experiences gender dysphoria while running cross country and track and feels they don't always fit in with their team.

"I just always felt I was ... the odd one out," Alden said. "I'm not sure if I fit in trying to do [sports]."

Jaidon Lowman '23, a transgender male, echoes these sentiments. In the past, they have been hesitant to play soccer due to their gender identity.

"I've felt like I'd be basically an outcast, like a black sheep, because of [being] the only 'girl' on the team with short hair and dressing masculine," Lowman said.

Hanna, Alden and Lowman all feel a lack of belonging to their respective teams due to their gender. However, Hanna has found the environment of the girls swim team considerate and welcoming.

"Everyone [on the team] is accepting, and there's really no one that is transphobic as far as I've encountered," Hanna said. "People make sure [they] use our correct pronouns."

Hanna feels fortunate to live where he does, as he attributes some of this support to Iowa City's diverse population and large LGBTQ community. In 2020, Iowa City earned a perfect score on the Municipal Equality Index of LGBTQ inclusion for the seventh consecutive year.

"I think I'm lucky to live in such an accepting community because Iowa City is really diverse, and people understand what it's like ... They're all just really understanding," Hanna said. "If they weren't, then it would be a little more difficult because I might face transphobia ... because not everyone is so supportive of that, and I might not be able to come out and be [who] I am."

Although his experiences on the swim team have been overwhelmingly positive, Hanna still faces challenges as a transgender athlete, including being misgendered by those not on his team.

"Being misgendered, it's not a big deal unless they're doing it on purpose because I still look like a girl ... and I don't blame them for that," Hanna said. "If they forget, it's a little hurtful, but it's okay. If they're doing it on purpose, then it's not accepting [of me]."

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BEHIND THE GUIDELINES

Iowa is the only state in the U.S. that has separate high school athletic organizations for boys and girls. Although both have existed for nearly 100 years, the IHSAA and IGHSAA have not merged into a single organization. IHSAA Executive Director Tom Keating attributes this separation to the precedent of teams based on gender and consequent physical capabilities.

"I think it's historical, more than anything, and it was based on the perception that physical size, speed and strength were different enough that [athletics] should be separated," Keating said. "I think those things still hold true today."

Keating views the inclusion of transgender athletes as relatively new to Iowa high school sports, a factor that challenges preconceptions of why sports unions are divided in the first place.

"That [division] made sense, until those who were identifying different than their birth gender wanted to participate in athletics," Keating said. "I think the reason [the organizations] have not come together yet is because of that remaining, lingering perception of a difference of size, speed, strength in the athletic arena."

According to Keating, the organizations have not found a compelling enough argument to unite as one.

"There are occasionally questions posed or suggestions made that our two organizations get together and try to work as one, as is the case in the other 49 states, but so far, both have been separate because the boards of each organization have not seen the overall benefit of bringing those two organizations together," Keating said.

Jean Berger, executive director of the IGHSAA, sees the separation of the two athletic organizations as a structural decision rather than one based on gender.

"I don't view the two organizations as being divided by gender as much as structured for specific purposes, philosophy and focus," Berger said. "That kind of separate governance allows each organization the ability to more effectively

utilize its resources to shape the experiences of the students they serve."

In Iowa, each school district locally addresses transgender students' desires to participate in sports.

According to Berger, the athletic organizations instruct each district to determine athletic eligibility before allowing students to compete.

Dr. Katie Imborek, co-director of the University of Iowa Health Care LGBTQ clinic, believes the inclusion of non-cisgender athletes calls the division of sports teams by boys and girls into question.

"When we have people who are non-binary or trans, it pushes back against whether we're doing this for a certain purpose [and] whether there is a real value to it," Imborek said.

Alden also believes the gender division in sports can be problematic when considering transgender athletes. They see the transgender policies set by the athletic associations as measures to limit transgender athletes' success in sports.

"It's not fair because we don't make Michael Phelps cut off part of his feet because they're longer than average because they're too big of an advantage," Alden said. "[We choose to] separate sports ... despite it not being even biological [in] a single way."

Even outside the sports realm, the gender binary is prevalent in everyday life, from occupational titles and pronouns to gender roles. Imborek sees both sides of the argument: preserving conventionality or questioning it. She believes physical differences between those assigned male or female at birth complicate matters, but doesn't think transgender athletes should be excluded from sports.

"The reality is that [biologically female] bodies are very different than a lot of men's bodies," Imborek said. "Should we exclude them? No, I don't think that we should."

According to Imborek, testosterone has a significant impact on athletic performance and is the biggest factor of the gender division in athletics, as it can increase an individual's muscle mass growth and endurance.

"Does it make sense to let someone who is taking testosterone and identifies as trans masculine play on a girls team?" Imborek said. "I don't think it does [because] from a fairness standpoint, in terms of competition, that testosterone is really what you should be thinking about."

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IHSAA & IGHSAU TRANSGENDER POLICY

Article 1A of Iowa Code Section 216.9 bans discrimination in most programs **EXCEPT ATHLETICS**.

The IHSAA and IGHSAU prohibit "exclusion of a person or persons from participation in, denial of the benefits of, or subjection to discrimination in any academic... program or activity **EXCEPT ATHLETIC PROGRAMS**."

Under the transgender athlete policies, students **MAY BE EXCLUDED** from participating in sports **BECAUSE OF THEIR GENDER IDENTITY**.

Sources: IHSAA and IGHSAU

LOOKING FOR IMPROVEMENTS

In 2020, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network included Iowa in a list of 10 other U.S. states with discriminatory transgender athlete policies. Iowa's requirements for transgender students to consistently identify as their gender "at school, home and socially" was cited as invasive.

Lowman questions this clause because not all transgender athletes are out and live in supportive households.

"[The IHSAA and IGHSAU] should understand that some homes don't support it, and [transgender individuals] can be abused for who they identify as a person," Lowman said. "I'm thankful my parents are supportive of me being [transgender], but I know some kids whose parents aren't like that ... It's just frustrating."

In Iowa, both the IHSAA and IGHSAU established student-athlete advisory committees to create a stronger connection with the student body. The committees, each consisting of 11 to 12 students representing various regions and sports, discuss issues facing Iowa high school athletes today.

Keating believes the IHSAA Student-Athlete Advisory Committee is a way to make student-athletes' voices heard. Traditionally, students and parents have directly reached out to athletic association officials to voice their concerns.

"I think there's always room to improve, and one of the things that we depend upon is input from students," Keating said. "We want [the student-athlete advisory committees] ... to bring to us the things that are important topics in their school, both related to athletics and activities and not ... I would guess we're going to get some

[feedback] in all kinds of realms, but certainly in the transgender, non-binary realm."

According to Keating, the committee applicant pool is currently predominantly white and middle-class. Because of this, Keating hopes students from all backgrounds will apply to the student-athlete advisory committees in the future.

Alden believes the student-athlete advisory committees will not fulfill their purpose without a diverse committee and representation of transgender and non-binary athletes, especially regarding the treatment of transgender athletes in Iowa.

"I'm not sure if that'll be on everyone's minds unless you're trans or have a trans friend or sibling," Alden said. "I'm not sure whether [the student-athlete advisory committees] would help or hurt anything."

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Amid the competition of high school sports, the overarching goal of the Iowa athletic organizations is to ensure all student-athletes feel accepted.

"The IHSAA and IGHSAU exist because we believe in the value of participation for all," Berger said. "Sports have long served as a place to break down barriers and to create a place for students to belong."

For many athletes, sports are a lifeline, providing some with a chance to escape and overcome hardships in their lives. However, exclusionary policies strip several transgender and non-binary youth of this opportunity.

Alden doesn't see why their gender identity should be more important than their passion for running and being on a team.

"I know why it might make other people uncomfortable, but then again, it's running ... I

love it," Alden said. "It's something that's worth interacting with people, so what about it if someone's not cis?"

In a 2018 study from the American Academy of Pediatrics, transgender and gender non-conforming students were significantly more likely to report poorer physical health and long-term mental health problems than cisgender youth. Across all gender identities, transgender males reported higher rates of depressive mood, having seriously considered suicide and attempted suicide than the youth of all other gender identities, according to the Journal of Adolescent Health.

"We already know that trans and non-binary adolescents, in particular, have a lot of health disparities and have many instances where they don't feel affirmed and where they might not have the same level of social connectedness that their peers do," Imborek said.

According to the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, using the name and pronouns that align with an individual's gender is one of the simplest yet most effective ways to support transgender and non-binary people. Doing so can promote a more gender-inclusive environment for all, whether in athletics or everyday life.

"We should figure out how we can make this opportunity [to participate in athletics] accessible for all students, not just students who exist on the binary," Imborek said.

However, the question of whether to prioritize fairness or inclusivity in athletics has been an ongoing debate. While they try to see the current policies as comforting to those worried about preserving fairness in sports, Alden doesn't agree with how transgender and non-binary athletes can easily be left out.

"I could understand this trying to make people less uncomfortable ... but it shouldn't be all upon me to make people feel less uncomfortable," Alden said. "People always find reasons to

exclude [others], and I'm tired of it."

Although Berger acknowledges the importance of including transgender athletes, she also believes the struggles of female athletes should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, Berger thinks compromise should allow both female athletes and transgender athletes to participate in school sports.

"Girls and women in sport understand being excluded based on gender, so they do not wish to exclude transgender females," Berger said. "Yet, their opportunities have been earned over time and should be preserved. We should be able to find a way to include transgender athletes in sport without all of the harmful rhetoric."

At West High, Athletic Director Craig Huegel hopes transgender athletes will form close connections with their coaches and teammates and feel safe to identify as who they are.

"Sometimes we don't necessarily know a student might be transgender. We may not be fully clued into what their [gender] is or what concerns they may have, so we try to do our best to ... get to know them and make them comfortable," Huegel said.

Huegel values the importance of welcoming all students to participate in athletics, regardless of their gender and other identity markers.

"If they're willing to meet expectations in terms of being a good teammate, coming to practices [and] competing, we want those students here no matter what their gender is," Huegel said.

For Alden, the connections they have made playing school sports have made them feel they can be more themselves, and recently coming out to a teammate has assuaged some of their fears of not feeling accepted. The teammate was proud of Alden and assured them the rest of the team would be as well.

"That just made me so happy [since] that is off my chest. I don't have to worry about that as much," Alden said. "It released an unbelievable amount of stress ... I'm so unbelievably, unexplainably happy."

Although coming out to their teammate made Alden more confident in themself, they see it as a move in the right direction rather than a destination. Alden encourages others that are unsure of whether to come out to be patient and understanding of themselves.

"[Coming out] is not the final solution," Alden said. "You should be allowed to be open, and you should be allowed to take your time to come out if you want [to]."

Above all, Alden believes identity should be a cause for celebration, not a reason for adversity. For them, coming out is a tool in discovering themself.

"It should matter that I'm trans, but it shouldn't change your opinion of me. I want [my coming out] to be remembered, but I don't want it to matter," Alden said. "I want it to be something that matters because it was a stepping stone but doesn't matter because you no longer need to step on it."

A HISTORY OF HARDSHIPS

Title IX establishes protections from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities.

1972

NCAA releases a set of guidelines allowing transgender students to participate in college athletics.

2011

IHSAA and IGHSAU implement the first version of their transgender athlete policy.

2014

Obama administration issues statement extending Title IX protections to transgender student-athletes.

2016

Trump administration rescinds Obama-era protections for transgender students under Title IX.

2017

IHSAA and IGHSAU adopt their current transgender athlete policy.

2018

GLSEN classifies Iowa's policies on transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming student-athletes as "discriminatory."

2020

On his first day in office, President Biden issues an executive order extending Title IX protections to transgender student-athletes.

2021

Source: Harvard University, NCAA, IHSAA & IGHSAU, U.S. Department of Education, The Guardian, transathlete.com, White House website