

BY OUR OWN RULES!

Navigating Sports While Trans and/or Non-Binary



 **youthline**

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This resource was created by trans youth and not policy experts

Introduction

Playing sports can be a huge part of your life and identity. It can shape your confidence, friendships, and how you feel in your body.

If you're trans and/or non-binary, though, it can get complicated. You might be wondering what will happen if you come out, whether you can still play on your team, or if people will treat you differently.

These fears don't come out of nowhere. Many sports are structured around strict ideas of gender, which can create policies or attitudes that actively exclude trans people. That can make you feel like you have to choose between being yourself or staying in the sport you love. That's not fair, and it's not your fault.

This resource is for trans and non-binary youth who are thinking about joining a sport, already playing, or figuring out what comes next. You'll find support, practical ideas, and ways to advocate for yourself.

As you read, you might want to keep these reflection questions in mind to help guide you:



- What am I hoping to get from playing sports, or what do I get from playing sports?
- How can I balance those goals with feeling comfortable in my gender identity?

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Trans athletes in sports and your rights!

Here in Ontario, there are some important things for you to know:

Under the Ontario Human Rights Code, discrimination and harassment based on gender identity or gender expression are prohibited, including in memberships to organizations (such as sports participation policies).

There is no Ontario law that specifically bans or allows trans athletes to compete in sports.

A total ban on trans athletes would be a violation of human rights.

But what does this actually mean?

The rules around inclusion for trans athletes depends on where you're playing. At a competitive level, different sports associations have different rules about trans athletes' participation.

If you encounter a discriminatory policy in your sports organization, or if your rights are being violated, you have the right to file a report and/or challenge it before the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario; however this is a very long and complicated process.

At a recreational level, most sports leagues adopt inclusive policies that let athletes play in the category that matches their gender identity. If you are unsure, you can always check with the league or sports association directly.

At school, protections for trans athletes can vary depending on your school board.

You can use this tool to locate your school board's policy on trans-inclusivity in sport:

<https://www.gegi.ca/find-policies/>



If your school board doesn't have a policy, or has discriminatory practices, GEGI also offer guidelines and tools for approaching someone and advocating for trans-inclusive policy at school:

<https://www.gegi.ca/talk-to-someone/>



Advocating for yourself can be scary, it's totally up to you to decide if it's something you want to do or not!

Laws and policies can also change over time, with Alberta banning trans athletes from participating in women's sports only in 2025 and the International Olympic Committee banning trans women from competing in 2026. Even when the laws say you should be included, the reality doesn't always match. You might still deal with exclusion, discomfort, or pressure to explain yourself. That can be exhausting and hard to change, especially on your own.

Deciding what to play



Do you have a specific sport in mind, or are you open to exploring?
How important is the sport's culture to you?

Different sports can have very different cultures. Some are more openly queer and trans friendly than others. For example, roller derby is widely considered to be a queer space and is generally supportive of trans and nonbinary folks. Lots of rock-climbing gyms also have queer climber meet ups. Some sports, like ultimate frisbee, are mixed gender by default. However, different leagues may be more inclusive than others about non-binary identities.

Some things to look for to feel out if a team would be a good fit:

- Do their registration forms include gender options beyond "female/male"?
- Do their policies state anything about inclusion, equity, anti-discrimination or commitment to creating a safe space for all?
- Has the social media page made any posts for pride month at one point?

This won't guarantee anything, but it can be a good indication that the league is at least making an effort and may be a space where you can more comfortably advocate for yourself.

If they have a social media page or a public email, you can also reach out directly to ask if the league has experience with trans athletes, and if there are any trans players in the league who would be willing to chat with you about their experiences.



What level do you want to play at?

Amateur sports tend to have more inclusive policies for trans athletes, while competitive or professional associations may have stricter medical transition requirements. A higher level may have more frequent practices, higher skills development, and more focus on winning. An amateur level might have less frequent practices and be more focused on socializing and just enjoying the game.



What type of league are you interested in?

Most high-level sports are divided into women's and men's categories, but some recreational leagues may not be! For example, many universities' intramural leagues have an open category (for everyone) which is usually dominated by men, a mixed category (which requires an even number of men and women on the team), and a women's category. None of these categories explicitly recognize non-binary identities, but mixed categories can be quite inclusive in practice.

For elementary and high school leagues, each school board usually has its own inclusion rules, but how teachers and coaches choose to apply or interpret those rules can be inconsistent.

Another option is joining a queer sports league. Gay or lesbian leagues may be very gender inclusive, but this is not a guarantee, so it is worth checking out the vibe of the specific organization you're thinking of joining. Some gay leagues have rebranded as queer leagues with the goal of being more gender inclusive, but they may still be dominated by cis gay men, which might not be what you're expecting. You can check out the leagues for yourself and try to connect with any trans or non-binary players ahead of time to hear about their experiences.

Playing on your terms

Much like being a singer, actor or writer, being an athlete is often a huge part of a person's identity, and it can feel really scary to worry that being trans or coming out could take that away. It's unfair to feel like you have to choose between your identity as a trans person and your identity as an athlete. There's no right or wrong way to balance your need/desire for social or physical transition with your desire to play team sports but there are lots of things to consider.

Do you want to stay in the same league you're already in?

There is no right or wrong decision; it's really what feels best for you. It can be helpful to imagine different paths and what you would hope to get out of each one. If you're feeling unsure, creating a list of pros and cons could also help.

Consider these questions:



- How comfortable do you feel socially where you currently are?
- What are you hoping to get from participating in sports? How do the advantages of playing in your league weigh against the disadvantages?
- What would transitioning look like if you stayed in your league? How do you see others responding? Would you rather keep your identity to yourself?
- If transitioning doesn't feel possible in your league, how easy would it be to find a different one?
- If you are currently in a gendered league, how would you feel possibly socially transitioning in that environment?

Are you interested in medical transition options?

Different leagues have different rules about whether certain medical transition steps are required or prohibited. If medical transition is something you are interested in, it might be helpful to learn what options exist by reaching out to the league to see if they have any specific policies in place.

You may be forced to choose between staying in the league you're in or medically transitioning – this is not an easy choice to make, and there's no right answer.



If you do choose to stay in the league, what other ways can you feel affirmed in your identity?

Staying safe and speaking up

How can you advocate for yourself?

Speaking up for yourself can be hard and scary, but you shouldn't have to do it alone. If you can, find a teammate, coach, or other adult you trust. They can back you up, help communicate your needs, or step in when things feel uncomfortable. You can also bring in someone from your own life, like a parent, friend, or mentor.

You have a right to ask for what you need, whether that's access to a private change space, reminding people to use the right name and pronoun, or support with coming out to teammates. Sometimes you might need to remind people more than once. That can be frustrating, but it doesn't mean that your needs aren't valid or that you're asking for too much.

You also don't owe anyone an explanation. If someone asks you a question that feels invasive or off, you can say you don't feel comfortable answering! You can set a boundary, suggest another resource, or ask them to learn on their own.

What will you wear?

Uniforms can be a big source of dysphoria. Regardless of what uniform your team wears, you are allowed to ask to wear what feels most comfortable for you. This can be as simple as asking for the uniform being worn by the men's or women's team if it's not what's been assigned to you or bringing your own clothes in your team's colours. There are also companies that design sportswear for trans athletes specifically (ex. swimsuits).

Using changing/locker rooms

Locker rooms can be a great place to get to know teammates, but they can also be very stressful. Having to deal with locker rooms can even make some trans athletes not want to play. If you're worried about it, there are some options to consider:



- Is there an all-gender bathroom or change room available?
- Do you feel comfortable getting changed in the locker room with your teammates?
- Is there a bathroom in the changing room you can use?
- Can you change into your uniform beforehand?
- Can you ask a trusted friend to hold up a towel to create some privacy?
- Is there a separate, private space you can access to get changed?

Gendered language

The world of sports tends to come with super gendered language, and you might often hear things like:

"Women-only hours"

"Man up!"

"Girls v.s. Boys"

"Let's go girls / boys /
ladies / gentlemen!"

Some things you could say:

"Can I choose which gender team I play on?"

"Hey, my pronouns are..."

"I feel uncomfortable in my gym class, can we talk about that?"

"I don't like being referred to as [gendered language], for me it feels [bad/ uncomfortable/ weird/patronizing/etc.]"

"I am [gender identity], please refer to me with [pronouns]."

"I'd feel more comfortable if you used gender-neutral language."

You can choose how to do this in a way that makes you most comfortable and safe. That can be in person, by email, over the phone, etc. You could also have a trusted person with you to support, help or talk for you with your consent.

Not saying anything:

If you don't say anything, that's okay too! Speaking up can be hard, and it may not be something you want to or can do for many different reasons. You are allowed to simply exist as you are, and it is not your responsibility to be a spokesperson or always educate people.

Deciding whether or not to come out to your team

Locker rooms can be a great place to get to know teammates, but they can also be very stressful. Having to deal with locker rooms can even make some trans athletes not want to play. If you're worried about it, there are some options to consider:



- Why do I want to share this?
- Do I actually need to in this situation?
- What am I hoping will happen if I do?

Your gender is real whether or not people know, and you do not owe anyone an explanation. You get to decide who to tell, when, where, and how.

It's also okay not to come out at all

For some people, not correcting others or trying to "blend in", feels like the only option. That can be exhausting and painful. If that's where you are, you're not doing anything wrong! It also doesn't have to be all or nothing. You might share with some teammates and not others.

If you're not out, it can be helpful to ask what would make this feel more manageable right now? Being closeted can take a toll, so it's worth thinking about what support you need in the meantime.

Affirmations, grounding & self-care

Sometimes, no matter how hard you fight for changes, things don't budge. This sucks and can feel really overwhelming! Dealing with transphobia or standing up for yourself takes a lot of energy and can end up making you feel even worse sometimes, especially when all you wanted was a chance to play some sports and have fun.



This next section offers some tips for how to take care of yourself in these moments of frustration or disappointment.

When you are feeling anxious or overwhelmed:

- Remove yourself from the situation or space
- Use grounding techniques (it can take some practice to figure out what works best for you in which circumstances, i.e. body movement, breathing exercises, distractions, etc)
- Stimulate your senses (light a candle/incense, pet a cat, listen to music on headphones, have a bath, play with fidget toys, prepare or eat your favourite meal, etc.)
- Match your breathing with someone else or a pet
- Attend to your basic needs (eating, sleeping, drinking enough water)
- Stretch, work out, run, yoga or other solo physical activities
- Go outside or be in nature

Some examples of grounding techniques:

The 5-4-3-2-1 Method:

Identify 5 things you see, 4 you can touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, and 1 you taste.

Texture Focus:

Trace the outline of an object or rub a smooth stone/fabric.

Environmental Observation:

Describe your surroundings in detail, focusing on colors, shapes, and patterns.

Muscle Relaxation:

Tense and release muscles, starting from toes to head.

Temperature Shock:

Hold ice, run cold/warm water over hands, or wash your face.

Reorientation:

State your name, age, current location, date, and time out loud.

Movement:

Stretch, do jumping jacks, or shake out limbs to release adrenaline.

Category Games:

Mentally list items in a category (e.g., dog breeds, cities, artists).

Counting:

Count backwards from 100 by 7s or say the alphabet backwards.

Alphabet Game:

Pick a category (e.g., fruits) and name items for each letter of the alphabet.

Building a support network and community care



- Who can you go to for emotional support?
- Who can help advocate for you? (a coach, friend, guidance counsellor, parent?)
- Who do you want to be aware of your identity?
- What services can you use?
- Helplines? Counsellors? Therapists? GSAs? 2SLGBTQ+ organizations? Support groups?

When you need a distraction



- Are there any poses or postures that make me feel energized, elevated, or affirmed in my identity?
- Are there any stimulating activities that I enjoy?
- Are there any shows, movies, books, or songs I find helpful/comforting?
- Have I eaten enough? Have I drunk enough water? Did I get enough sleep?
- How can I stimulate my senses? (light a candle/incense, pet a cat, listen to music on headphones, have a bath, etc)

When you are feeling discouraged

Note: Not every affirmation may feel right for you. Feel free to take what feels good and affirming to you and skip what doesn't!



- Your identity belongs to you, and no one else can tell you who you are
- You are not alone
- Your identity is valid and important
- It's ok to choose to disclose or not to disclose your identity!
- You are worthy of respect and inclusion
- You deserve every bit of your success
- Transphobia makes life harder to navigate. You are resourceful and you are doing the best you can
- Only you can decide how to best express your identity, you deserve to express your identity however it feels best for you
- Sports and activities take many different shapes and forms
- You deserve to access sport as much as anybody else and feel comfortable and affirmed while doing so
- You are more than your gender identity; You contain multitudes

Encouraging media: You are not alone!

You can refer to the following media for more gender affirming advocacy!

Four Myths About Trans Athletes, Debunked By the American Civil Liberties Union ACLU

<https://www.aclu.org/news/lgbtq-rights/four-myths-about-trans-athletes-debunked>



Battling Disinformation About Transgender Rights By the Human Rights Campaign (HRC)

<https://www.hrc.org/magazine/2021-spring/myths-and-facts>



Trans Women in Sports: Facts Over Fear By the Office of Transgender Initiatives

<https://www.sfgov/trans-women-in-sports-facts-over-fear>



Let Us Play: Winning the Battle for Gender Diverse Athletes By Harrison Browne

Calls for a reframing of the binaries from youth and high school levels all the way to the national leagues. Offer a new path forward, led by solutions proposed by gender diverse athletes themselves.

<https://www.harrison-browne.com/author>



Changing The Game (2019)

Documentary following three transgender high school athletes navigating, sports, adolescence, and intense public scrutiny.

<https://www.changinggamedoc.com/about>



WE RUN: Non-Binary Inclusion In Sports

Documentary/interview featuring activist Lauren Lubin that advocates for breaking down gender barriers in athletics. It highlights the necessity for inclusive spaces, such as non-binary categories in running.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfsXTxDCuB8>



Meet Black Athletes Paving the Way for LGBTQ Equality

HRC celebrates some of the black sports stars who have become society's role models, exhibiting the discipline, courage and determination that motivates us in our own lives.

<https://www.hrc.org/news/meet-black-athletes-paving-the-way-for-lgbtq-equality>



Obie Is Man Enough, Book by Schuyler Bailar

A fiction coming-of-age story about transgender tween Obie, who didn't think being himself would cause such a splash.

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/671866/obie-is-man-enough-by-schuyler-bailar/9780593379493>



Transmisogyny in sports

You've probably already heard a lot of anti-transgender rhetoric about sports, as it's been all over the media and politics lately. While trans athletes in sports have been in the news a lot lately, scrutinizing the gender of athletes isn't new. The women's category has been particularly policed, going back to the 1940s, where sex verification began in response to accusations that some high performing women were "men in disguise".

While there might be an intention to even the playing field by dividing sports into "men's" and "women's", we know that human biology and gender identity are far more complex than that!

Many folks think that it is not fair to cis women and girls to have trans women or intersex folks play on women's teams because of muscle mass/hormones. This idea is rooted in transphobia, misogyny, and racism. Chromosomes, hormones, and anatomy vary person-to-person and there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that hormonal or bone structure variations offer an "unfair advantage" in competitive sports.

Rules in sports have repeatedly shifted in ways that unfairly target trans and Black women, undermining their successes. These policies reflect racial biases and continue to police women's bodies, especially women of colour.

For example, Caster Semenya, a South African runner, competed in the 2016 Olympics but was later banned by regulations instated in 2019 due to having higher levels of testosterone despite being a cis woman. Similarly, Imane Khelif faced intense scrutiny after winning gold in Boxing at the 2024 Olympics and has been subjected to sex verification testing.

To date, only one openly trans woman has ever competed in the Olympics, meanwhile countless cis women have been subjected to invasive gender testing. Discriminatory gender-testing policies do not protect women as they claim to, whereas trans inclusive policies have been shown to lead to overall increases in girls' participation in sports.

To read more:

Anti-Trans Sports Bills Aren't Just Transphobic – They're Racist, Too

<https://www.them.us/story/anti-trans-sports-bills-transphobic-racist>



Sex Testing Rules Harm Women Athletes

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/31/sex-testing-rules-harm-women-athletes>



Caster Semenya Won Her Case, But Not the Right to Compete

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/18/caster-semenya-won-her-case-not-right-compete>



Trans Inclusion in School Sports Doesn't Hurt Cisgender Girls, New Report Finds

<https://www.them.us/story/trans-inclusion-school-sports-study>



Resources

Tools for supporting practitioners, educators, and the general public in thinking through issues around trans and intersex inclusion in sport:

<https://www.recreation-collective.com/trans-affirming-sport.html>



Supporting Trans Student Athletes:

<https://campusmentalhealth.ca/infosheets/supporting-trans-student-athletes/>



List of trans athletes to follow/learn more about:

Non-binary

@thequinny5 - won Olympic gold for Canada in soccer

@layshiac - first openly non-binary WNBA player

@nikkihiltz - American Olympian in track and field

@jaiyahsaelua, fa'afafine (Polynesian third gender) - American Samoan footballer

Trans women

@jplatt32 - Former pro Canadian hockey player

@chelseawolfbmx - USA Olympic women's BMX freestyle

@tifannyabreu10 - Brazilian Women's Volleyball Superliga

@drveronicaivy- first transgender world track cycling champion

Trans men

@pinkmantaray - Korean-American NCAA D1 swimmer

@hbrowne24 - 1st trans pro hockey player, Canadian

@thechrimosier - duathlete for men's USA Olympic team

@nessmurby - 1st openly trans Paralympian, Canadian

HelpLines & Peer Support

LGBT Youthline

Chat: <https://www.youthline.ca/helpline/peer-support-helpline/>

Phone: 647-694-4275

Hours: Sun-Fri 4pm - 9.30pm EST



Trans Lifeline

Canada: 877-330-6366

Website: <https://translifeline.org/>



LGBT National Help Centre

Chat: <https://www.lgbthotline.org/> (international)

Phone: 800-246-7743 (US and Canada)

Hours: Mon - Fri 4pm -12am; Sat 12pm - 5pm



Interligne

Chat: <https://interligne.co/>

Phone: 1 888 505-1010



At YouthLine we are here to listen, and navigating sports is something we can talk about!

Feel free to chat with us if you'd like some support.