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TRANS INCLUSION MESSAGING TOOLKIT

THE INCLUSION PLAYBOOK



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INTRODUCTION

Think about the first time you played your sport.

Maybe you were a natural. Or maybe it took a few seasons before you found your groove. Maybe you eventually met your partner or best friend in that sport, or maybe you simply found a place where the outside world would gradually fade away until nothing else existed but you and the field, court, arena, or pitch.

We come to sports at different times and by different paths, but we all stay for the same reasons. We understand—in fact, we’ve experienced firsthand—the transformative power of sports.

There are, of course, the benefits to our bodies: building muscle, strengthening bones, lowering blood pressure, even, in some cases, preventing chronic diseases as effectively as medication.^{[1],[2]}

And there are benefits to our mental well-being, too: When children are physically active, they’re less likely to be depressed or anxious.^[3] And they’re less likely to attempt suicide.^[4] That’s especially true for those who play a team sport. According to a study published in the *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine*, team sport athletes are less likely to report anxiety and depression than their peers who play individual sports.^[5]

And those benefits last long after the final match. Physically active youth tend to enjoy better life outcomes. They’re more likely to go to college, they report higher annual earnings, and they’re more productive at work.^[6]

Like every coach you’ve ever had has told you, sports build character. They instill the kinds of qualities that make for successful, healthy members of society. Sports increase self-esteem, drive home the importance of teamwork, and develop leadership skills.^{[7],[8]}

And that’s just the data.

Those of us who play know there’s more to sport than that.

Getting up before the sun to put in extra reps; ice baths after practices in blazing summer heat; snatching victory from the jaws of defeat—only because you left nothing on the field. These are feelings we know and love. They defy description and can only ever be conjured, there, in those moments—in the early morning dark of a locker room, or on the shoulders of our teammates. They keep us coming back, day after day, year after year. They make our sport what it is.



Sport has an immense impact on every aspect of our well-being. It strengthens our bodies, sharpens our minds, and unites our communities. It inspires and uplifts us. At its best, sport reminds us of the triumph and resilience of the human spirit.

But when we exclude people from sports, if we shut them out because of who they are, we don't just deny their humanity—we deny them the very things that nourish it.

That's not what sport is about.

THE PROBLEM:

Sports are full of obstacles. Gender shouldn't be one of them.

For those of us who are lucky enough to have sports in our lives—who have felt the impact on our physical, mental, and social well-being—we can't help but want to share our sport with the rest of the world. We want to grow our community, and we're committed to bringing the benefits of sports to people around the country, and around the world.

Living out that commitment means welcoming those who want to play with open arms—and open minds. It means taking concrete steps to ensure our environment—from our fields and locker rooms, to our bleachers and front offices—is one where people feel comfortable showing up as their true selves.

If we exclude athletes for wanting to play as themselves and shut the doors on people for simply being who they are, we risk losing this generation—and the next generation, too.

That's why, to reach as many current and prospective players and fans as possible, **we need inclusive policies.**

After all, the players and fans of the future care deeply about diversity, equity, and inclusion—and they won't play an unfair game.

And they won't just sit silently in the stands, either:

- 65% of millennials support comprehensive nondiscrimination protections for the LGBT community.⁹
- 1 in 6 Generation Z adults identify as LGBT.¹⁰ And more than one in three personally know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns.¹¹
- Consumers of all ages are increasingly expecting brands to commit to fighting social injustice.^{12,13} And that's especially true for younger generations.
- If they perceive a brand to be homophobic, more than three quarters of Gen Zers say they wouldn't just stop buying from that brand—they'd spread the word about it, too.¹⁴

Right now, we're already playing catch up. Gen Zers are half as likely as millennials to watch live sports regularly, and they're twice as likely to never watch them at all.¹⁵

But younger generations aren't the only ones who care about inclusion. Roughly half of all adults in America say that society has more work to do when it comes to accepting trans people.¹⁶

Despite this range of support for LGBTQ players, there's still serious work to be done:

- In a survey published in 2019, 82% of people reported hearing homophobic or transphobic language in a sports setting.¹⁷
- And of those who reported having a negative experience in a sports setting related to their sexual orientation or gender identity, 20% reported experiencing acts of physical violence.¹⁸

Trans players are disproportionately targeted by players on opposing teams, and, often, their own teammates don't just look away—they join in.

- In fact, among those who harass and abuse LGBT athletes, 49% are fellow teammates.¹⁹

So, it's no surprise that among high school seniors, 86% of trans boys and 88% of trans girls don't play a sport.²⁰

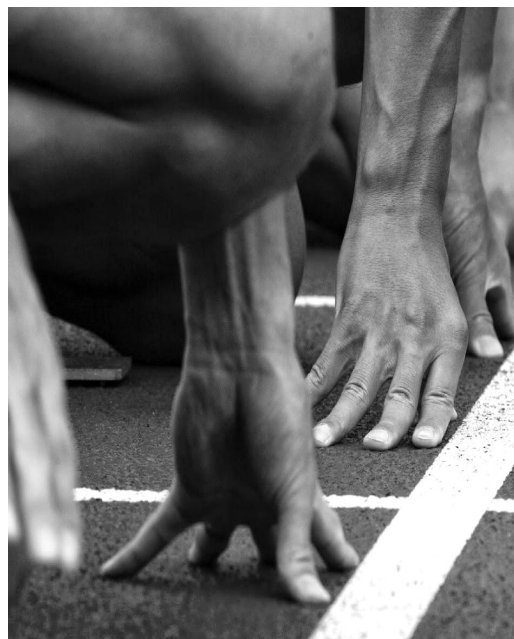
- 62% of trans students who report never having played a sport outside of gym class cite their gender identity as the reason.²¹

For most of us, our concerns about sport are limited to fairness. For trans folks, in the rare instances when they are allowed to play, they're concerned about safety.

- 41% of transgender boys and 34% of transgender girls report *never* having felt safe in the locker room.²²

It's important to note that for those of us who work with athletes, we may not be getting the whole picture.

82% of transgender youth aren't out to their coaches about their gender identity.²³



We can't create a culture that's inclusive and welcoming to all athletes if athletes within our communities don't feel safe being their true selves.

Part of earning the trust of trans athletes means understanding that, for them, what happens on the field doesn't stay there. The discrimination they face from teammates and opponents alike rarely ends when the clock expires.

- Trans people are twice as likely to be unemployed.²⁴
- More than 75% of trans folks who are employed report experiencing some form of workplace discrimination.²⁵
- Nearly half of all trans people report having suffered some form of sexual assault in their lifetime.²⁶
- In the largest-ever survey of transgender folks in America, roughly half of all respondents reported that they had been verbally harassed because of their gender identity—in the last year.²⁷ Nearly one in ten reported being physically assaulted in the last year because of their gender identity.²⁸
- In 2019, the FBI reported that hate crimes motivated by gender-identity bias increased by 20%.²⁹

If we allow a culture of transphobia to exist in sport, we alienate trans players and discourage non-cisgender newcomers from playing our sport.

In doing so, we deny a vulnerable population valuable systems of social support and community.

That isolation can have serious consequences.

- Trans youth are more than twice as likely to be taunted or mocked by family members for their identity as their cisgender LGB peers.³⁰
- Nearly 82% of trans people report seriously thinking about suicide in their lifetime,³¹ and 40% of those respondents reported attempting it.³² That's nearly nine times the rate of the general population.³³

But it doesn't have to be this way.

As a community, sport has the power to create a different kind of experience for trans people.

According to a report from the Center for American Progress, trans college athletes report significantly higher levels of psychological well-being and were significantly less likely to have had suicidal thoughts or to have self-harmed in the prior year than their trans peers who don't play sports.³⁴ And trans youth who participate in sports report higher levels of self-esteem, greater feelings of belonging, and lower rates of depression.”³⁵

And when trans athletes are included, they're not the only ones who benefit.

From Quinn, the trans, non-binary starting defender for the NWSL's OL Reign, who plans to make history playing at the Tokyo Olympics this year; to Harrison Browne, the first out trans professional hockey player who serves as the Inclusion Leader for the NWHL advisory board and special ambassador for the NHL's Hockey Is For Everyone initiative, trans athletes are doing more than just advocating trans rights—they're elevating their sport for everyone who plays.



By making sports more inclusive and more accepting, we can help combat the discrimination that trans folks face both on and off the court. And in doing the right thing, we also help our organization grow.

That's why it's so important that our sport is taking action.

HOW WE CAN CHANGE THE GAME:

Inclusion Is Essential

Let's be clear: Inclusion means *everyone*. Championing inclusivity for one group in a way that excludes another group isn't inclusion.

The good news is that being inclusive is a lot like winning: the more you do it, the more momentum you gain, the more it happens. It's a virtuous cycle.

You might hear some people say that trans inclusion—and the inclusion of trans women, specifically—will ruin sports for cisgender women.

It's a claim that simply isn't true.

In many cases, trans-inclusive policies are supported by the cisgender athletes, women, and girls that opponents claim to be “defending.” The National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education,³⁶ the Women's Sports Foundation,³⁷ and 22 other women's rights and gender justice organizations³⁸ have come out in support of trans-inclusive policies.

In March of this year, more than 500 student athletes co-signed a letter addressed to NCAA President Mark Emmert and the NCAA Board of Governors, calling on the organization to ban states with trans-exclusive athletic policies from hosting championship events.³⁹

Support for inclusion isn't confined to the court or field, either. It's also in the stands.

Fans want sports to be more inclusive.

- More than 70% of fans support athletes who speak out about social justice issues.⁴⁰
- 56% of people say they'd view professional sports teams more positively if the team expressed support for LGBT athletes and fans.⁴¹

And, while trans inclusion in sports has recently become a favorite target of those looking to drum up outrage, the truth is that **trans athletes have been playing sports for years.**

The NCAA has had a trans athlete inclusion policy for a decade.⁴² And the IOC, which represents more than 100 different members from 76 countries, has had trans-inclusive policies since 2003.^{43, 44}

These major athletic organizations are invested in keeping sports fair and accessible to all of the athletes they represent. That's why the policies they've adopted have been informed by years of evidence-based research. If they thought that implementing them might compromise the integrity of competition, they wouldn't have done it.

These policies have been on the books for years now. And cisgender athletes have continued to thrive. The integrity of competition has remained intact.

In fact, the evidence suggests that trans-inclusive policies benefit all women and girls, cisgender and transgender alike.

In states with more trans-inclusive policies, rates of high school sports participation among all girls have either remained stable or increased.⁴⁵

- In California, where trans youth have been participating in sports since 2014, sports participation rates among high school girls are the highest they've ever been, increasing by almost 14% since trans youth have been allowed to play.⁴⁶



- Similarly, in Connecticut, where trans athletes have been allowed to play since 2013, sports participation among high school girls has increased in the ensuing years.⁴⁷

When it comes to trans inclusion the real rivalry is clear: It's not between transgender women and cisgender women—it's between equality and prejudice, fact and fiction.

It's time we ditch the idea that inclusion for all means exclusion for some, and get to work on making sports a safer space for everyone.

ON DECK:

The Next Play

Sports change lives. In individuals, sports inspire self-confidence, teach valuable social skills, and promote physical and mental well-being. On a societal level, they offer safe and structured environments, encourage community engagement, and bring people together.

Everyone deserves access to the benefits that athletics offer, but for trans folks in particular, sports can be transformative. Studies show that—in the face of frequent discrimination, harassment, rejection, and violence—just one affirming coach or teammate can make a world of difference for a young trans person.⁴⁸

To stay true to the foundational values of our sport, it's essential that our policies encourage broad participation among marginalized groups, balancing inclusion and competitive fairness. To ensure that they do, **commit to building your policy around these seven principles:**

Principles

1. **Respect.** Transgender identities, experiences, and bodies are not new to sports—and the inclusion of trans folks should not be up for debate. When writing policies and working with transgender athletes, policymakers should be intentional about centering the lived experiences of trans folks and actively preventing or undoing policies that discriminate on the basis of gender identity.
2. **Inclusion.** The benefits of sport should be open and accessible to all. As such, policies should prioritize inclusion and avoid unnecessarily restrictive or invasive requirements, especially at the youth sport levels. Creating inclusive policies allows administrators to grow the reach of our sport and extend its benefits to a broader community.
3. **Balance.** Effective policies require a nuanced consideration that takes into account the level of play. Policymakers should avoid crafting blanket policies that fail to account for age, competition level, and the specific needs of each sport. For example, given that youth and recreational sports primarily serve to teach participants fundamental life skills, promote healthy activity, and create lifelong passions, policies should always encourage broad, inclusive participation. Thus, more restrictive policies that might be in place for collegiate or professional athletes have no place in the majority of youth or recreational sports settings.
4. **Fairness.** Fairness is a key tenet of any sports program. Because competitive advantages are inherent in sports (height, weight, economic, and geographical differences), fairness in athletics is achieved by applying rules to all athletes—including transgender athletes—equally. Targeting transgender athletes with separate rules because of their gender is arbitrary, discriminatory, and goes against the very spirit of sports.

5. **Nondiscrimination.** The color of your skin, who you love, and how you identify have no bearing on the outcome of the game. They shouldn't determine whether or not you can play it, either. Policies that ban transgender athletes from participating in a particular sport, event, or league are discriminatory and have no place in sports.
6. **Evidence-Based.** Policies should be based on the most up-to-date, credible science. Medical and legal/policy expertise—not gender stereotypes, misinformation, and fear-mongering—should inform the creation of transgender participation policies. Policies should be revised and updated to remain consistent with developments in science and medicine.
7. **Privacy.** Trans people face intense scrutiny and discrimination on and off the court or field, nationally and abroad. To protect their safety, dignity, and confidentiality, policies—and their implementation processes—should prioritize the privacy of transgender athletes. This includes the privacy of their gender identity and health records.

POST-GAME INTERVIEW:

Busting Myths About Trans Athletes and Inclusion

“Why does this matter?”

It's simple: From improving physical and mental health, to positively impacting education outcomes and future earnings, our sport has the power to change lives for the better. We believe everyone deserves the opportunity to access those benefits.

But right now, for many transgender people, the experience of playing sports—and all that comes with it—is under attack. This is an issue of fairness, equality, and access. Our sport has the power to further injustice or fight it. We're choosing to fight it.

“But won't trans athletes have inherent advantages over their competition?”

All bodies—cis or trans—are different. There's no evidence that trans athletes will always have unique advantages over their cisgender peers. And there's no evidence that trans women, on average, are any bigger, faster, or stronger than cisgender women are.⁴⁹

Of course, athletic performance—especially at the elite level—depends on much more than the physical body. Factors such as nutrition, mood, access to facilities, the competency of one's coaches, to name just a few, all play a role in performance.

Specifically, as to the question of testosterone, research has been inconclusive in determining its exact impact on performance. While some studies have found some correlation between higher testosterone levels and improved explosive athletic performance, other studies have found no—or weak—links, while still others have found an inverse relationship.⁵⁰

“What if men pretend to be women in order to gain unfair advantages?”

Pretending to be someone you aren’t in order to participate in organized sports is both unethical and impermissible. Transgender athletes are transgender on and off the court or field, and, as we’ve explored above, identifying with a gender other than the one you’re assigned at birth comes with the possibility—and likelihood—of enduring unthinkable discrimination and hostility in today’s society. There’s no evidence to suggest that anyone has ever been willing to bear those costs to cheat their way into a shot at winning a medal.

Not to mention, transgender athletes undergo rigorous scrutiny from the press and other competitors in addition to being subject to a slew of strict tests before being allowed to compete. It’s unlikely, if not impossible, that someone pretending to be a gender they aren’t, could successfully meet the standards imposed on transgender athletes by NCAA⁵¹ or IOC policies.⁵²

“Couldn’t including trans women ruin women’s and girls’ sports?”

Trans women are women, and trans girls are girls. There is no evidence to suggest that trans women’s participation will “ruin” sports for cisgender women.

And while, in 2021 alone, legislators in at least 30 states have introduced bills that would ban transgender students from playing sports at public schools, none have been able to cite local examples of trans inclusion proving disruptive for cisgender athletes.^{53,54,55}

In fact, the evidence suggests that the opposite is true: In states with more trans-inclusive policies, high school girls’ participation in sports has either remained stable or increased.⁵⁶

In California, where trans youth have been participating in sports since 2014, the number of high school girls playing sports is higher than it’s ever been, increasing by almost 14% in the six years since trans-inclusive policies have been implemented.⁵⁷

Trans women have been able to participate in NCAA⁵⁸ events for over a decade, and they’ve been able to compete in IOC events for nearly two decades,⁵⁹ and the nature of the game has remained unchanged.

What’s more, many cisgender women support transgender women having the opportunity to play alongside them. From Tennis legend Billie Jean King, World Cup champion Megan Rapinoe, and WNBA icon Candace Parker, to the more than 500 college athletes who co-signed a letter calling for the NCAA to pull its championships from states with anti-trans athletic bans, many of the very athletes these policies claim to be defending, vehemently oppose them.^{60,61}

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