

Trans People and Sports
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As Trans-Athletes Become Increasingly More Common, State Lawmakers Try to Take Away the Existing Freedoms Allotted to Trans People.

The Pennsylvania Legislature's "Protect Women's Sports Act" Comes Out as the Newest Bill in the Current Culture War on Transgender People across America:

PHILADELPHIA, Pennsylvania — Across the country, legislation regarding trans people has become increasingly popular, with most states targeting trans people in sports and/ or healthcare. Pennsylvania Republicans have even drafted their own bill: House Bill 972, or the "Protect Women's Sports Act." Although the underlying prejudice is nothing new, the recent wave of state legislation highlights to constituents the growing culture of tolerated transphobia within mainstream politics.

The push from lawmakers to separate trans people from opportunities available to society at large has been an enduring trial for trans people, Emory Robertson said. As a current third-year Juris Doctor candidate at Penn State Law, Robertson said legislation has been used in the past to make trans people feel like an "other."

"Since its inception in 1990," he said, "the Americans with Disabilities Act has excluded trans people from protection under two separate provisions, which are entirely redundant and were enacted solely on animus. If you look at the exclusions, where trans people are listed along with pedophiles and pyromaniacs, that kind of tells you that it's not really about whether or not trans people deserve protection."

More than just excluding this group, Robertson said that laws written about trans people are usually based on falsehoods.

"In another section of the ADA," he said, "it says 'those with transvestism,' which isn't even a word, 'transsexualism, and gender identity disorders are not included.' Those are no longer even in the DSM as diagnoses. It's now 'gender dysphoria,' which has nothing to do with having a disorder; it's just a condition that some trans people have. So [the law] doesn't match up with the medical science, it's just arbitrary."

Robertson said using this kind of language reinforces preconceived narratives around trans people, furthering the intolerance experienced by the minority group. Within the Philadelphia School Board, member Mallory Fix expressed concern about the rhetoric used by lawmakers.

“The bigger issue is the tone/narrative around this statewide,” she wrote in an email. “We have policies to protect our students, but the hate speech at the state level is out of our control.”

Within the PA legislature, Rep. Barb Gleim (R-Cumberland) and Rep. Martina White (R-Philadelphia), among others, have drafted House Bill 972, or the “Protect Women’s Sports Act.” The act would prevent trans women, women assigned male at birth, from participating in women’s sports programs in grades K-12. Despite the bill passing the House, Gov. Wolf has already said he plans to veto the bill.

As a former trans athlete himself, Elijah Tapp, 21, said the major problem with bills such as this is that they don’t work towards solutions that include trans people.

“The goal was to remove trans people completely,” Tapp said, “and just make it so there’s no place for them. If [those in favor of the bill] wanted to have some kind of compromise, we’d be talking about an open division for competing, like a co-ed option. But nobody wanted to do that; all they did was take photos that make certain trans female athletes look really muscular and strong and then complain ‘there’s a ‘man’ taking women’s titles.’”

Many school districts across Pennsylvania already allow trans-athletes to perform with their preferred gender. In June of 2016, Philadelphia’s School District adopted Policy 252. The policy allows transgender and gender-nonconforming students to participate in P.E. classes and intramural sports in a manner consistent with their gender identity.

Tapp, who participated in swimming while attending York Suburban High School, said that he feels lucky to have competed without the current political climate, but is afraid for those who are still in this situation.

Another former trans athlete, Matthew Dawkins, 24, said that it was through athletics that he found himself. Dawkins began track freshman year of high school, before the start of his transition in junior year. He said switching to the guys’ team was the natural next step, but it was not a seamless integration.

“I definitely felt more comfortable,” Dawkins said, “and that’s why I made the ultimate decision to switch teams. But I think it was the fact that I didn’t know I would make other people uncomfortable. Being accepted into the locker rooms and having a trans person on their team, I was really scared to involve myself in something that’s potentially putting other people at risk.”

However, Dawkins said he was able to overcome the discomfort and work towards bettering himself as an athlete.

“In terms of the times, time differences, and PRs,” he said, “taking testosterone did not change my PR times at all. I was just as fast when I started as when I was ending my senior year. If anything, my skills just got better through practice, but there wasn’t a significant difference, just in my physical appearance and my confidence and happiness.”

Ultimately, Dawkins said, he wants to use his story as a positive example of what happens when trans people are allowed to have the same opportunities as their cisgender peers.

“My slogan is ‘trans normality,’” he said. “It’s not something you see all the time. So it’s good to show that it is possible to transition in a healthy way and have support. You always hear about these sad stories, things about suicide and being homeless, and I was really lucky, so I try to use that as a positive.”