

Inclusive and Affirming Support for Transgender and Gender Non-conforming Athletes



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Transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) athletes have become the target of heated political battles and predatory discrimination in recent months. More than 25 states have introduced legislation targeting TGNC youth athletes in 2021 alone (Mosier, 2021). Throughout this article the terms *transgender* and *gender-nonconforming* (TGNC) will be used to describe anyone whose gender identity does not match the sex biologically assigned to them at birth (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011; Morris & Van Raalte, 2016). Considering the record number of bills containing discriminatory practices and policies attacking TGNC athletes (Goldberg, 2021), we believe it is essential for mental performance consultants and other stakeholders within sport organizations to adopt an inclusive and affirmative approach for supporting athletes who identify as TGNC. In this article we advocate for inclusive and affirmative measures that can be implemented to support the mental health, performance, and retention rate of TGNC athletes using affirming language and culturally competent applied practices.

Affirmative Language

As mental performance consultants and other stakeholders within sport organizations, it is our responsibility to ensure that athletic environments and policies remain and become more affirming for athletes who identify as TGNC (Goldberg, 2021). A recent national study has shown that TGNC youth who receive respect for their chosen names and pronouns attempt suicide at less than half the rate (12 percent) of those who do not experience respect from others regarding their gender identity (28 percent; The Trevor Project, 2020). Further, rates of generalized anxiety, depressive symptoms, and self-harm among this population reduces with the proper support and care. Making assumptions about gender identity based on an individual's appearance and name can be harmful and offensive. Further,

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choosing to ignore a person's chosen name and pronouns is an oppressive act and sends a message that TGNC people do not or should not exist in the world (MyPronouns.org, n.d.).

Applied Recommendations

We summarize suggestions on how to incorporate inclusive language and applied practices to ensure that the wellbeing, safety, and support of TGNC athletes are prioritized (Goldberg, 2021; Morris & Van Raalte, 2016).

- Refer to athletes by their correct names and [pronouns](#) when talking with and about them.
- Correct yourself and others when a mistake is made regarding names and pronouns. Mistakes might happen, but it is important that you apologize and correct yourself rather than get defensive or frustrated.
- Normalize pronoun use during introductions, in email signatures, and online profiles.
- Use last names during the first roster call and ask athletes to share their chosen name.
- Advocate that correct names and pronouns of athletes be included in all program materials (i.e., team rosters, websites, game-day programs, social media, etc.)
- Use gender-neutral terms (they vs. he or she; Mx. vs. Mr. or Miss; let's go team vs. let's go guys or girls; athletic events vs. women's or men's athletic events).
- Proactively engage in conversations to ensure access to gender-appropriate restrooms and locker rooms for athletes during all team events.
- Be aware that athletes are constantly holding intersecting identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, (dis)ability, religious affiliation), and some are more salient than others.
- It is not the job of the person who holds the identity to educate you. If you have questions, refer to other resources to educate yourself.
- Stay up to date on the best practices relating to TGNC athletes and the constantly changing political landscape impacting athlete participation.

The implementation of the suggested terminology and actions within our applied work can be the difference between an athlete feeling affirmed and safe within an athletic space or choosing to quit, or worse, engage in self-harm. Although there is much more advocacy work that needs to be done to support this population, including the demand for more inclusive policies for TGNC athletes nationally, these best practices can be implemented into our work immediately as we make progress toward a more inclusive and affirming environment for all individuals participating in sports.

Conclusion

As mental performance consultants and other stakeholders within sport organizations, it is our obligation to ensure that athletes feel welcomed, affirmed, and safe within athletic environments. The measures suggested throughout this article, including use of inclusive language and culturally relevant applied practices, must be considered to ensure the inclusion and safety of TGNC athletes at all levels of competition. Failure to incorporate these best practices within our work will perpetuate continued participation barriers in sport (Cunningham et al., 2018; Morris & Van Raalte, 2016) and deny TGNC athletes the right and opportunity to engage in personal development opportunities through athletic competition (Goldberg, 2021).

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