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The Portrayals of Trans Athlete Accomplishments in Newspapers

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Sociology.

By
Sierra Davidson

Under the mentorship of *Dr. Nancy Malcom*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between events related to trans athletes and their portrayal in the media. This research project focuses on the accomplishment of one trans athlete, Lia Thomas, winning a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 swimming championship in 2022. Articles from three newspapers of differing biases: The Washington Post, USA Today, and Washington Examiner, and one local newspaper of Thomas' competing state, Philadelphia Daily News, were used in this analysis. Emerging themes were identified and codes were developed. These recurring themes and codes revealed differences in how newspapers reported on this event as well as a shared concern for the future of women's sports.

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Literature Review

Gender in Sports

Sports have long been an area in which the gender binary and gender expectations have been enforced. Most sports have been gendered due to the feminization or masculinization of particular activities. Football and similarly aggressive sports are expected to be played by hegemonically masculine men, while feminine women are expected to participate in gymnastics, figure skating, and other “elegant” sports. From a young age, boys and girls are encouraged to participate in sports that align with gender expectations. For example, boys are often discouraged from taking dance lessons and are instead redirected to choose a more gender-appropriate sport, such as football or basketball. Comparably, girls are discouraged from choosing sports that require aggression and physical strength, both of which are seen as typical masculine traits. Gender and sports are tightly conflated in society.

Despite the strict reinforcement of gender roles and expectations in sports, women have been able to create their own spaces in sports and have used them as a way to strive for equality. Women have used sports as means to combat narrow views of femininity, as well as gain access to male-dominated spaces (Chinurum et al. 2014). However, this does not mean that women now play alongside men. Instead, many sports, such as basketball, divide players into two separate associations - one for men and another for women. This allows the inclusion of women in sports while still enforcing the gender binary and the idea that men and women are vastly different from one another (Wachs 2005).

Due to this distinct separation of gender in sports, trans-inclusive policies typically focus on situating trans individuals into the already existent gender structures

rather than encouraging the upheaval of the binary in sport. Phipps' examination of university policies, rules, and regulations in regards to trans-inclusive sports found that "the gender binary structures are the only legitimate way to organize sport," (2021:93). This limits gender identities and forces trans individuals to neatly fit into the expectations of one gender if they wish to participate in sports. A common theme found when reviewing the justifications for the separation of gender in sports is the "protection" of girls and women (Schmit 2008). This same argument is utilized in defending trans-exclusionary practices. Sharrow (2021) found that these tactics are used in order to maintain the subordination of women and the idea that cisgender, heteronormative individuals are the only individuals that belong in sports. The exclusion of trans individuals in sports is related to the wider division of gender in sports and the struggles of women to gain equality in this realm.

Trans Athletes and Debate Regarding Inclusion

Although most trans-inclusionary policies focus on adhering to the gender binary in sport, there is still large debate over whether trans athletes should be allowed to participate with the gender their identity aligns with. There are multiple factors that influence individuals' views on trans athletes and their place in sport. Flores et al. (2020) found that women and less gender-conforming individuals have higher acceptance of trans athlete sport participation than men and those with higher levels of gender identity conformity. Furthermore, research shows that "those who adhere to gender role traditionalism or those with higher levels of sport fandom are less supportive," (Flores et al. 2020:393). Those with traditionalist views on gender are likely to disagree with trans

athlete participation due to disapproving of trans identities and the idea that one's gender identity can differ from the sex they were assigned at birth. Those with higher levels of sport fandom most likely do not support including trans athletes because of the view that they will alter traditions and historical gender expectations that have been enforced in sport.

Moreover, a point of disagreement with the inclusion of trans athletes in sports is related to how they may disrupt the commonly held belief that sport performance is closely tied to one's physical body and sex. In examining the relationship between trans athletes and gender performance, Semerjian and Cohen (2006) noted that trans individuals have become the target of debate and violence "because of their ability to reveal the arbitrary relationship between sex, gender, and the body," (41). If trans individuals are able to perform at similar levels to cisgender individuals, it overturns the idea that a person's biology and physical body determines the amount of athleticism, physical capabilities, and activities one is capable of. This could dismantle the gendered expectations and limits that sport rules, criteria, and associations have been built on. This argument for trans athlete exclusion could also explain why trans women are less accepted in sports than trans men (Tanimoto & Miwa 2021). Bodies assigned male at birth have been considered to be "inherently" stronger and more physically capable; therefore, this has been used as an argument to exclude trans women from sports. Allowing trans women to compete with cis women deconstructs the idea that bodies assigned male at birth are biologically stronger and more capable of performing well in physical sports.

Furthermore, excluding trans women athletes is often justified by claiming they have an “unfair” advantage because of their biology. Jones (2021) researched the arguments often used to exclude trans women in U.S.A. powerlifting and discovered that there is a heavy emphasis on the presence of testosterone to justify why trans women athletes have an unfair advantage over cisgender women. However, in Karkazis and Jordan-Young’s (2021) analysis of the scientific data to support this argument, researchers found that there is no scientific evidence that backs the claim that testosterone creates a “sex gap” between athletes. This study actually found that there is significant overlap in testosterone levels between cisgender male and cisgender female athletes. This exemplifies how excluding trans women solely due to testosterone is not strongly supported, as there is scientific evidence that proves contrary to this argument.

Trans Media Coverage

With the amount of debate and arguments surrounding trans athlete inclusion, how trans individuals are presented in the media significantly affects the public’s view on these issues. Martin and Rahilly revealed that gender simplicity, the notion that men are men/women are women and these categories differ significantly, is commonly used to support bills banning trans inclusion in sports (2023). In a content analysis study by McLaren et al. (2021), researchers found that trans media representation is beginning to shift. Previously, the presentation of trans individuals and characters in the media was narrow and often negative. However, portrayals of trans individuals in television shows and other forms of media are becoming increasingly complex and more positive. McLaren (2021) claims that this is “an important area of future study” and that the

shifting nature of trans media coverage can result in revealing the gender binary that constrains every individual in society.

Although trans media coverage overall appears to be changing to no longer oversimplify trans identities, news sources in particular tend to present a narrow view of trans identities. This presents an issue for both trans individuals, who are having their identities reduced, and cisgender individuals who are developing a limited view on gender identities. Capuzza (2016) develops the importance of this by explaining how news has the “power to regulate social identities” and “play a key role in advancing cultural understandings of gender diversity” (93). The negative, limited portrayals of trans individuals and athletes in news coverage harms trans and gender non-conforming youth. Pang et al. (2022) found that negative media coverage of trans individuals impacts gender nonconforming and trans youth directly by reducing their access to gender-affirming health care. This then adversely affects this group’s mental health because having access to gender-affirming health care is related to improved mental health (Rafferty et al. 2018). Additionally, research has shown that negative news about gender minorities results in increased stress levels for trans and gender non-conforming youth (Pham et al. 2020). Negative news portrayals of trans individuals directly harm trans and gender non-conforming youth, as well as society as it limits views on gender identities and possibilities.

Importance of News Framing

Due to the importance of news coverage on trans individuals and societal views of gender, it is imperative to understand how trans athletes are currently being portrayed in

news sources. Buzzelli and Towery (2021) found that local and national newspapers tend to focus on sport associations' decisions and rules, rather than discussing the trans athlete themselves. By not framing the individual as the problem, these news sources did not reveal a clear stance on the issue. However, neutrality appears to not be the best approach to reporting on issues that affect an at-risk minority group. Krane and Barak (2012) highlight how positive and sincere dialogue in news reports could directly lead to society developing more tolerance and compassion for vulnerable groups that are discussed in the news. Dubon et al. (2018) noted that policy changes were directly correlated to advocacy efforts that resulted in media headlines. This demonstrates the impact of news and how they frame issues on policies and rules.

Purpose

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between events related to trans athletes and their portrayal in the media. In doing so, this research project focuses on the accomplishment of one trans athlete, Lia Thomas, winning a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 swimming championship in 2022 and how various news sources reported this event.

Methods

This study is a qualitative, content analysis research project that examines how various news sources report Lia Thomas' NCAA Division 1 500-yard freestyle win in March of 2022. The ProQuest News and Newspaper database was utilized to gain an overview of the news coverage related to Lia Thomas' NCAA victory. To narrow the

data, news reports from the dates of March 16, 2022 - March 31, 2022, which include the two weeks following Thomas' win, were selected. This research project analyzes news articles from four news outlets: *The Philadelphia Daily News*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Examiner*, and *USA Today*. I used purposive sampling to select newspapers for inclusion in this study. *The Philadelphia Daily News* was selected because Lia Thomas was a varsity athlete representing the University of Pennsylvania, a university located in Philadelphia. *The Washington Post* was chosen to represent a left-leaning news source, while *USA Today* represents a centrist source, and the *Washington Examiner* represents a right-leaning news source (Sheridan 2021). A total of sixteen articles were selected to be used in this research (See Table 1 below for all of the articles used in this project). I chose two articles from *The Philadelphia Daily News* because only two articles were written by this newspaper about Thomas' win during the selected time. I used four articles from *The Washington Post* because they were the only articles written on this topic during the selected date for this newspaper. For similar reasons, five articles were chosen from the *USA Today* newspaper due to only having published five articles covering Thomas' win specifically during the narrowed time frame. Lastly, five articles were selected from *The Washington Examiner*. Five articles out of forty were chosen from this newspaper in order to have a similar sample size to the other newspapers. I chose these five articles specifically because they focused on covering Thomas' win while other articles included various other topics.

After selecting the articles, themes were identified and codes were developed to fit these emerging themes. While reading the articles, I identified commonly recurring themes and noted them as potential codes. I identified nine initial codes in the articles:

“Actual/Real Women,” “Biological Differences/Advantages,” “Science/Physics,” “Erasing Women’s Sports,” “Followed Rules,” “Harmful to Trans Community/Discriminatory,” “Fair Differences,” “Male Language (Gender Terminology),” and “Fear Mongering/Bigotry (Political Implications)” (See Table 2 below for the codebook developed in this project). These codes captured the language articles used while reporting Thomas’ win, assertions that are made about gender and the fairness of Thomas competing, and the potential consequences of her win and the reactions to it. After identifying these initial codes, I performed a second round of coding to apply any potentially applicable codes that were found in later articles. During this second round of coding, no new codes were created. However, this second round of coding was useful because later codes that were developed were applicable to earlier articles. Next, I recorded the frequency that each code appeared and in which articles. From here, I analyzed the codes to draw conclusions on how the various selected newspapers reported on Thomas’ win. My analysis revealed three central themes: Pronoun Use/Gender Terminology, Shared Concerns About Women’s Sports, and Debate About Validity.

Table 1. Articles

Article Title	Newspaper	Date Published/Author
“Man Edges Out Man for ‘Woman of the Year’ Prize”	<i>Washington Examiner</i>	March 17, 2022a/Tremoglie
“Congratulations to Emma Weyant, the Real Woman Who Won the NCAA 500-Yard Freestyle Event”	<i>Washington Examiner</i>	March 18, 2022b/Tremoglie

“Physics, Independent of Biological Reality, Explains Why Lia Thomas’s Victory Over Women is Rigged”	<i>Washington Examiner</i>	March 18, 2022/Lowe
“Finally, More People Are Speaking Out Against the Damage Being Done to Women’s Sports”	<i>Washington Examiner</i>	March 31, 2022c/Tremoglie
“Lauren Boebert Courageously Acknowledges Emma Weyant as the NCAA’s Fastest Woman in the 500-Yard Freestyle”	<i>Washington Examiner</i>	March 30, 2022d/Tremoglie
“Trans Swimmer Lia Thomas Winning NCAA Title Should Spark Legitimate Debate, Not Hate”	<i>USA Today</i>	March 18, 2022a/Wolken
“Penn Swimmer Lia Thomas Becomes First Trans Woman to Win NCAA Swimming Championship”	<i>USA Today</i>	March 18, 2022/Gilbert
“Trans Swimmer Lia Thomas Finishes Fifth in Bid for Second NCAA Championship”	<i>USA Today</i>	March 18, 2022b/Wolken
“Gov. Ron DeSantis Proclamation: Florida Swimmer Who Lost to Trans Athlete is ‘Rightful Winner’”	<i>USA Today</i>	March 22, 2022/Anderson & Herald-Tribune
“Caitlyn Jenner Says Trans Swimmer Lia Thomas is Not the ‘Rightful Winner’ of NCAA Title”	<i>USA Today</i>	March 24, 2022/Henderson
“A Swimmer Swamped by	<i>The Washington Post</i>	March 17, 2022/Jenkins

the Fears of Others”		
“Thomas Makes History in the Pool”	<i>The Washington Post</i>	March 18, 2022a/Carpenter
“Thomas Leaves Questions in Wake as College Career Ends”	<i>The Washington Post</i>	March 21, 2022b/Carpenter
“Fair Play”	<i>The Washington Post</i>	March 28, 2022/The Washington Post
“Champion Lia Thomas Makes History”	<i>Philadelphia Daily News</i>	March 18, 2022a/Rushing
“Penn’s Thomas Didn’t Dominate”	Philadelphia Daily News	March 22, 2022b/Rushing

Table 2. Codebook

Code	Explanation	Example	Frequency
1. Actual/Real Women	Transgender women are not “actual/real” women.	“Only actual women should win any ‘Woman of the Year’ awards,” (W.E. 1)	13 Total 6 Articles
2. Biological Differences/ Advantage	There are fundamental biological differences between people born male that give them advantages.	“Significant biological advantages that men have, even after hormone therapy,” (W.E. 1)	16 Total 8 Articles
3. Science/ Physics	It is science that trans athletes have an advantage.	“It’s pure physics that rigs the game for Lia,” (W.E. 3)	7 Total 3 Articles
4. Erasing/ Harming Women’s Sports	By allowing trans women to participate in sports, women’s sports are at	“Women’s sports are at risk of disappearing,” (USA 1)	11 Total 8 Articles

	threat/risk being erased.		
5. Followed Rules	Thomas followed NCAA rules; issues should be with these regulations, not athletes' personally.	"Thomas is only doing what the NCAA allowed her to do," (USA 1)	5 Total 3 Articles
6. Harmful to Trans Community/Discriminatory	The negative reactions and backlash against Thomas competing/winning is discriminatory and harmful.	"To exclude trans athletes from elite competition ... is wrong, harmfully so," (W.P. 1)	6 Total 4 Articles
7. Fair Differences	The difference between Thomas and other swimmers is fair and does not give her an inherent advantage.	"She didn't break any records. Her race times were not extraordinary," (P.D.N. 2)	11 Total 5 Articles
8. Men/Male (Gender Terminology)	Asserts that Thomas/trans women are men.	"The man racing as a woman," (W.E. 1)	15 Total 5 Articles
9. Fear Mongering/Bigotry	Negativity/disagreement with Thomas competing and winning is fueled by fear mongering and bigotry.	"Ignorance and bigotry that lies at the heart of these bills," (W.P. 4)	4 Total 3 Articles

Findings

Pronoun Use/Gender Terminology

How each newspaper reports Thomas' win differs in the language used to describe Thomas and her gender identity. Notably, the *Washington Examiner* is the only

newspaper that consistently referred to Thomas as a man or male athlete. Additionally, each of the five articles from the *Washington Examiner* used the male gender terminology, without referring to Thomas by her self-identified gender. They asserted, “Lia is not a woman, but a man identifying as a woman,” (Tremoglie 2022b). This indicates that the language used in this newspaper asserts that Lia Thomas is a man. Contrasting from this, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and *Philadelphia Daily News* all affirmed Thomas’ gender and referred to her as a woman and used the appropriate she/her pronouns, never once using masculine gender terminology to refer to Thomas’ identity.

Along with this, some articles made a distinction between Thomas and “real” or “actual” women. This is primarily found in articles from the *Washington Examiner*; although, two articles from *USA Today* report claims about Thomas not being the rightful winner due to her identity as a transgender woman. The articles from the *Washington Examiner* differ from these *USA Today* articles, however, by reinforcing the idea that trans women are not real women. They argue that Thomas is a “man racing as a woman”, and should not be allowed to compete alongside other women in NCAA competitions (Tremoglie 2022a). On the other hand, *USA Today* only reports statements that the governor of Florida made claiming that Thomas was not the rightful winner due to her gender identity. Anderson and Herald-Tribune, *USA Today* authors wrote, “The governor's proclamation states that ‘since she is a native Floridian from Sarasota, I, Ron DeSantis, Governor of the State of Florida, do hereby declare in Florida that Emma Weyant is the rightful winner of the 2022 NCAA Division I Women's 500-yard

Freestyle,” (2022). The authors of the *USA Today* articles did not invalidate Thomas’ gender, contrasting from the *Washington Examiner* articles.

Shared Concerns About Women’s Sports

A common concern that is expressed throughout articles in each newspaper is the potential impacts of including trans individuals in women’s sports. The perspectives on this concept vary between the newspapers, however. *The Washington Post* approaches this topic by discussing the benefits of the changing structure of women’s sports. These articles highlight the ability for the NCAA, as well as athletes, to experience growth and be provided with opportunities for exploration. The authors for *The Washington Post* articles take the stance that college sports are “supposed to be about exploring who you are,” (Jenkins 2022). They argue that including Lia Thomas in these competitions is not preventing this, and, therefore, she should be allowed to compete in NCAA competitions.

Contrary to this, the *Washington Examiner* voices the concern that allowing Thomas to participate at all is detrimental to women’s sports. They believe that allowing transgender persons to compete in women’s sport is inherently harmful and that there is a need to save women’s sports. The articles from the *Washington Examiner* that covered this topic claim that Thomas’ participation “threatens the very existence of women’s sports, which were created in order to make up for that biological advantage,” (Tremoglie 2022c).

All of the newspapers appear to acknowledge the value of having women’s sports. They accomplish this through showing shared concerns about the integrity and endurance of the women’s sports sector. Rushing elaborates on this concern through writing, “The

participation of Thomas, a 22-year-old transgender woman, was held up by some as ‘the beginning of the end of women’s sports.’ Yet ultimately, out of the meet’s 18 events, Thomas won one race and placed in the top eight in two others,” (2022b). They differ in how they believe Thomas, and other trans people, participating in college sports will impact this institution. The *Washington Examiner* insists that including trans individuals in women’s sports will devalue and erase women’s sports altogether. The other newspapers, particularly *The Washington Post*, have a more encompassing perspective of women’s sports and see potential areas of growth and development for including trans people in college sports.

Debate About Validity

Several articles brought up concerns about the biological and physical difference between transgender and cisgender athletes. This is chiefly found in the *Washington Examiner* articles, in which they argue that there are innate biological and physiological differences between people assigned male at birth and people assigned female at birth. Lowe, an author for a *Washington Examiner* article, makes the claim that “Lia’s body is clearly not that of a biological woman”, and that it is “pure physics that rigs the game for Lia Thomas,” (2022). They argue that these differences are unable to be altered enough with hormone therapy and that including trans individuals in women’s sports competitions is unfair; Tremoglie states that men have significant biological advantages, “even after hormone therapy,” and are “taking away opportunities from actual women and thus harming women’s sports,” (2022a). They assert that including trans individuals

in sport competitions is scientifically wrong and is harmful to the women's sports institution.

Differing from this, *The Washington Post* and *Philadelphia Daily News* articles argue that the differences between trans athletes and cisgender athletes are fair and Thomas has a right to compete with other athletes. They support this claim by referencing cisgender female athletes who are larger than Thomas, such as the athlete Missy Franklin, who "is 6-foot-2 and 165 pounds," (Jenkins 2022). An article from *The Washington Post* also explains how having a larger body might actually disadvantage someone in swimming competitions, according to a medical physicist, Joanna Harper: "A larger skeleton is actually harder to aerobically push after the muscle loss of hormone therapy," (2022). Lastly, Rushing, an author for a *Philadelphia Daily News* article, highlights how ordinary Thomas' performance was: "She didn't break any records. Her race times were not extraordinary," (2022b). The authors of these articles demonstrate how cisgender athletes can have similar body compositions, highlight how Thomas' body may actually disadvantage her, and note the ordinary performance of Lia Thomas in order to support their claim that trans athletes should be allowed to compete with other athletes of their gender.

There is also debate about the NCAA rules allowing Lia Thomas to compete. Both *USA Today* and *Philadelphia Daily News* explain that any disagreement with Thomas competing should be with the rules that have been established by the NCAA, not with Lia Thomas herself. As a *USA Today* article explains, "Thomas is only doing what the NCAA allowed her to do, based on the rules it had in place when the season began," (Wolken 2022a). Furthermore, Rushing, an author for *Philadelphia Daily News*, reports

on opinions of the public by writing, “One such mother of a swimmer who competed against Thomas said her frustration was with the NCAA. ‘It’s the NCAA rule. It’s not [Thomas’] fault, she’s doing what she’s allowed to do’,” (2022a). Articles from the *Washington Examiner* appear to be in opposition with this idea and write against both Lia and the NCAA regulations. Tremoglie writes, “When large organizations like the NCAA and the Ivy League support men identifying as women, they do so at the expense of actual women,” (2022c). Despite these differences, it is apparent that there is a desire for more science to back up allowing transgender individuals to compete alongside cisgender women is apparent across multiple newspapers.

Discussion/Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how various newspaper outlets report the accomplishments of trans athletes, with special consideration of how political bias may impact the language and nature of reporting these events. This goal was accomplished through examining how four news sources (*The Philadelphia Daily News*, *Washington Examiner*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*) reported Lia Thomas’ National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 swimming championship win in 2022. Three main themes emerged from this analysis: Pronoun Use/Gender Terminology, Shared Concerns About Women’s Sports, and Debate About Validity.

I found that the right-leaning source, *Washington Examiner*, differed the most significantly from the other sources. The newspaper articles from *Washington Examiner* consistently perpetuated the idea that assigned sex at birth determined a person’s gender

and that there was inherently a biological/physical advantage that was granted to people assigned male at birth in comparison to those assigned female at birth. Through this concept, they argued that Lia Thomas, and therefore other trans athletes, did not have a place in women's sports as they were not "real/actual" women. They also centered the idea that trans inclusion was undoubtedly harmful to women's sports as an institution. In contrast to this, the other outlets mostly used appropriate gender terminology and pronoun usage when referring to Thomas. They focused on how trans inclusion was fair and the benefit this inclusion could bring to women's sports. I infer that this difference in discussion about Thomas' gender and win is likely due to political bias variation between the news outlets.

On the other hand, articles from each news source appeared to share the concern about the changing field of women's sports and the desire to keep this institution protected. However, where the *Washington Examiner* saw a threat in the inclusion of trans athletes, the other outlets often saw the advantage in including Thomas. In defense of including Thomas, Jenkins writes, "Does our current collegiate model, with its inclusion of Thomas and other trans athletes, call forth competition that is interesting, meaningful and valuable? The answer is yes," (2022). All of the newspaper outlets appear to acknowledge the value of having women's sports and share a concern with ensuring the integrity of this institution. This highlights a point of agreement between these often conflicting outlets and that this could potentially reveal some unison. This agreement between differing sources could lead to the advancement and understanding of the role trans athletes can play in sports. This demonstrates the need for extensive more research to be completed on the effects of trans inclusion in sports. In particular, there

needs to be more scientific support behind the physical differences, or lack of, between trans and cis athletes and how this could impact their performance within their sport. The social implications of this inclusion on both other athletes and society as a whole should be explored in more depth as well.

In closing, this research can support the advancement of understanding how trans individuals are seen by the public. In addition, it can specifically reveal how trans athletes are reported on and how their accomplishments may be viewed differently depending on the news outlet that is reporting on the event. It also highlights several areas of future research, such as how other trans accomplishments are reported on, the potential need for more scientific support for trans inclusion in sports, and how women's sports as an institution can be adequately preserved while progressing into a more accepting, inclusive future.

Limitations

Although the findings of this research can have important implications in an expanding, dynamic area of research, there are multiple limitations. First, the overall sample size was relatively small. Only sixteen articles were analyzed in this project. Furthermore, only four newspaper outlets were selected to be analyzed. Another weakness of this study was that it only explored one event. Other sports, levels of competition, and regions may be reported on differently. Specifically, student trans athletes have been largely discussed in the news. There is much debate on what rules should be implemented in elementary, middle, and high schools concerning trans athlete

inclusion in school sports. Future research should focus on these varying areas as well as how accomplishments from trans individuals are reported outside of sports.

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