

COVERAGE OF ANTI-TRANSGENDER ATHLETE LEGISLATION IN MAINSTREAM SPORTS MEDIA

Vincent Peña and Jamie Jelinek



Jamie Smed/Wikimedia Commons

Canadian soccer player Quinn became the first trans athlete to win an Olympic medal in 2021.

In October 2021, Texas banned transgender athletes from participating in high school sports, becoming the latest state to enact a law specifically aimed at barring transgender girls from athletic competition. This law came amid a recent wave of transgender-exclusion efforts at the high school and college levels across the United States, as nine states have passed bills and another 26 states have considered or proposed similar legislation. Though trans inclusion has been a hot-button issue around the country for several years, mainstream sports outlets have largely ignored the issue. An initial examination of two of the largest and most prominent sports outlets in the U.S.—ESPN.com and Yahoo Sports—reveals the “[symbolic annihilation](#)” of trans athletes. Symbolic annihilation describes how mass media representation often marginalizes or renders invisible certain groups of people. Only a handful of articles address these bills, signaling a reticence to engage in one of the more [important issues](#) in sports over the last several years. The few articles that do cover anti-trans legislation mostly present the issue as something that remains separate from professional sports.

Scholars have argued that journalists, when they cover transgender athletes, often rely on sexist and cis-sexist language, include many sources who espouse transphobic ideas and views, and use benevolent anti-trans rhetoric. In recent years, transgender individuals have seen a significant rise in [visibility](#), with [celebrities](#), [athletes](#), and others coming out as trans and an [increase](#) in transgender representation in film and television. However, that newfound visibility has resulted in increased efforts to [police and control the spaces](#) in which transgender folks are allowed to exist, including an intense interest in policing women’s sports.

[Advocates](#) for transgender inclusion argue kids should be able to compete according to their gender identity, and that depriving them of the opportunity can have damaging effects on their mental health and well-being. [Critics](#) of transgender inclusion in sports argue there are inherent biological differences between the sexes, and that transgender women and girls have physical advantages that make their participation in sports unfair. Trans exclusion is often presented under the guise of gender equality for women, a tactic that flies in the face of the reality for women in sports. Athletic organizations and sports media have a poor record of promoting equality for women’s sports at the high school, college, and professional levels.

Reports from ESPN and Yahoo! Sports primarily present anti-trans athlete legislation within the context of state politics, which fails to address fully the social impact of these harmful efforts. In his [report](#) of Texas’s bill, Yahoo! Sports writer Jason Owens frames the issue as just one of many controversial bills to be signed by Gov. Greg Abbott. Citing recent restrictions on abortion and COVID-19 mandates in Texas, the article focuses more on Abbott’s political reputation than about the experience of transgender women and girls. Similarly, an ESPN [article](#) on exclusionary efforts in Kansas focuses on Governor Laura Kelly’s political career. While it does address the implications of the conservative legislation, the concern for transgender athletes is overshadowed by the explanation that “the ban is likely to be an issue in the 2022 Governor’s race.” Another ESPN [report](#)



These reports overwhelmingly place the rights of transgender athletes into the frame of political debate, emphasizing a problematic cultural belief that trans bodies are up for debate.”

Advocates for trans athletes push back against recent legislative proposals.



DCStockPhotography/Shutterstock.com

outlines the guidelines and laws that govern transgender participation in sport in each state, including the names of the governors that have signed exclusionary bills. These reports overwhelmingly place the rights of transgender athletes into the frame of political debate, emphasizing a problematic cultural belief that trans bodies are up for debate.

The myopic focus on the legislative barriers faced by transgender athletes results in a limited view of the broader cultural problem. Conservative states such as Texas, Tennessee, and Kansas monopolize headlines because these new laws are a part of a coordinated effort by conservative lawmakers across the country to ban trans athletes from playing sports. Conversely, more moderate and left-leaning states remain largely outside the scope of critique. As a result, the few bills that have been proposed in more politically liberal states have not been passed into law. However, by only reporting on the issue from one angle, audiences can view sport's transphobic culture as a problem exclusive to conservative areas.

The increased coverage of the issues faced by transgender athletes, although important, remains narrow, especially regarding the fight for inclusion of transgender women in

professional sports. Transgender men like triathlete Chris Mosier have been featured in mainstream sports media—such as appearing in ESPN's [Body Issue](#)—while coverage of transgender women has remained limited to frames focusing on politicians, particularly as it relates to transgender inclusion. Another limitation of mainstream coverage is that it downplays the position of professional sports organizations on the issue. Aside from the work of ESPN's Katie Barnes, including their [coverage](#) of policy changes within the Premier Hockey Federation, the policies of America's most popular sports leagues aren't discussed. As a result, the fight for inclusion is positioned as an issue separate from mainstream sports culture.

The coverage ESPN and Yahoo! Sports give to issues of trans exclusion is important, and in some ways an improvement on previous coverage. However, by centering the political debate around transgender inclusion, these sports outlets frame the issues faced by transgender athletes as undeserving of adequate attention. Transgender athletes deserve the same rights, privileges, and opportunities afforded to cisgender athletes, and it's important that mainstream sports media outlets not further their marginalization by ignoring the widespread efforts to bar them from competition. ■

**Read (and download) the complete
2022 Report: Politics in Sports Media**

Visit www.politicsinsportsmedia.org