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News



Transgender Athletes, College Teams

October 5, 2010

Keelin Godsey was a National Collegiate Athletic Association champion hammer thrower and won All-America honors in hammer, weight and discus, while on the Bates College track team. The women's team, to be exact -- although Keelin identifies as a man.

Godsey graduated in 2006. From the time he was a freshman, and started to achieve athletic success, he also wanted to transition from being a woman to a man, but he was terrified of doing so -- in part because of fear of letting down the team. During his senior year, he started identifying as a man, began the process of changing his first name (which used to be a woman's name) and started having his teammates and others refer to him with male pronouns. He took no gender-transition medications, nor did he have any surgery - and he continued to win for the women's team.

At Bates, coaches, faculty members and team members were enormously supportive, Godsey said in an interview Monday. But when he started the process, and in the years before he did so, he had no idea how he would be treated, and whether his spot on the team would be endangered by his identity. Godsey is one of the examples in a report, ["On the Team,"](#) issued Monday by several advocacy groups that believe athletes like Godsey shouldn't have to worry about losing spots on the team. The report calls for a new national standard on when transgender athletes of various types should have the option of playing on men's teams, women's teams or either.

The NCAA is currently studying the issue -- and has had the policy of leaving decisions up to individual colleges, meaning that no national standard exists today. While NCAA rules about men's and women's teams were developed without a sense of a growing transgender population, the issue is starting to surface in college sports. The NCAA reports that its national office has received 30 inquiries in the last two years about how colleges should deal with transgender athletes. Those numbers could increase, given that more people than in the past are identifying themselves as transgender, more are doing so at younger ages than in the past, and a growing number of colleges have anti-bias policies that cover gender identity.

The report argues that in this environment, the lack of a national standard is unfair both to transgender students and to all athletes. The response by Bates was consistent with the guidelines in the new report, but Godsey said that this should be the norm, not the exception. "This is a really important issue," said Godsey. "We need to allow people to compete and be themselves at the same time, and to do that, you need to know that the coach will know what to do, and the athletic director will know what to do."

The report divides its recommendations for colleges into two categories of transgender students: those who are undergoing hormone treatments and those who are not. (And the report notes that many people who identify as transgender do not take medical steps.)

For those undergoing hormone treatments, the report recommends that a male-to-female transgender athlete should be able to participate on men's teams, but should complete one year of hormone treatments before competing on a women's team. The report recommends that a female-to-male transgender athlete, who is taking prescribed testosterone, should be allowed to compete on men's teams, but must seek an exemption to NCAA rules barring the use of testosterone.

For those not undergoing hormone treatments, the report recommends that transgender students should all have the option of competing on the teams consistent with birth gender, that female-to-male students be allowed to participate on either the men's or women's team, but that male-to-female transgender students not be permitted to compete on women's teams.

The report notes the concerns some have expressed about male-to-female athletes having an unfair advantage because of their pre-transition bodies. But the report says that its recommendations are based on scientific studies showing that after a year of hormone treatment, that advantage would be gone, and the recommendations are based on that time span.

Further, the report says that fears of people switching genders for the purpose of winning spots on women's college teams are simply unrealistic. "[T]he decision to transition from one gender to the other -- to align one's external gender presentation with one's internal sense of gender identity -- is a deeply significant and difficult choice that is made only after careful consideration and for the most compelling of reasons," the report says.

While the report addresses such practical issues, it argues strongly that the key issue is one of fairness. "Core values of equal opportunity and inclusion demand that educational leaders adopt thoughtful and effective policies that enable all students to participate fully in school athletic programs," it says.

"Over the course of many years, schools have learned and continue to appreciate the value and necessity of accommodating the sport participation interests of students of color, girls and women, students with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. These are all issues of basic fairness and equity that demand the expansion of our thinking about equal opportunity in sports. The right of transgender students to participate in sports calls for similar considerations of fairness and equal access."

The report was written by Pat Griffin, former director of the It Takes A Team! Education Campaign for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Sport and professor emeritus of social justice education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst; and Helen J. Carroll, director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights' Sports Project. The report was co-sponsored by the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the Women's Sports Foundation and It Takes a Team! The sponsoring organizations held a meeting last year to gather experts -- including NCAA representatives -- to discuss these issues.

A spokeswoman for the NCAA said that the association doesn't have a formal policy on transgender athletes, but recommends to colleges that they follow the classifications on students' identification documents, such as driver's licenses or voter registration cards. But it is currently the college's right to designate an athlete as male or female. The spokeswoman said that while this system has worked, "the matter can become complicated because of the differences in identification documents among states."

Further, the issue can be important for the way teams are classified. A female on a male team does not change the designation of the team, but a male on a female team classifies the team as "mixed," making it ineligible for NCAA women's championships. Any classification of a team as "mixed" lasts for the rest of the academic year.

The NCAA is studying the report and working on its own review of the issue, the spokeswoman said, with the goal of making sure any policies developed "are in the best interest of student-athlete well-being."

— **Scott Jaschik**