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Hobart and William Smith Athletics Consider Themselves “One-Team” as Transgender Athletes Spark Controversy Around Gender Equality



By Frances Wilson

Lia Thomas’s rise to fame since being named the NCAA Division I Championship title as a transgender woman has many colleges scrambling to prepare for what happens next. Although Hobart and William Smith is a Division III school and has a wide range of athletic teams, the institution’s future is murky when it comes to welcoming a transgender athlete onto its campus.

Lia Thomas, a transgender swimmer at the University of Pennsylvania, has recently broken many women’s records and is only 9 seconds off Katie Ledecky’s 500-yard freestyle record. Many people are fighting against Thomas’ eligibility to swim on the women’s team while others believe that this is a breakthrough in representing transgender athletes.

The ongoing controversy has led organizations like the International Olympic Committee and the NCAA to retrace their steps and consider the rules surrounding the ability of transgender athletes to compete in collegiate sports.



Donald Miralle/Sports Illustrated

The NCAA has recently sat down and discussed changing the policies for transgender athletes. They took a different approach compared to the I.O.C. and concluded that transgender women could compete on collegiate women's teams after one year of testosterone suppression. The three phases that the organization drew up began in the winter of 2022 and ends in the spring of 2025. [Here](#) is the full NCAA policy for transgender athletes.

These policy changes and the new rules that have been laid down seem simple and easy to agree with. However, many people have glossed over the science behind male and female testosterone levels and the physical advantages that come with each body.

According to the New Yorker, the focus on testosterone levels seems straightforward: on average, men's testosterone levels are 15 times more than a woman's which establishes the advantage of taking testosterone. Many researchers have discussed the testosterone that is naturally made by the body. There is a gap between how much exogenous testosterone a man produces versus a woman which turns to the idea of hormone replacement therapy.

This may not counteract all competitive advantages a body gains during testosterone-driven puberty. Hormone therapy may not fully reduce body mass or grip strength which begs the

question of whether or not there is enough evidence to justify the use of testosterone suppression or not.

Transgender Athletes and the Media

Since Lia Thomas has begun her rise to fame as a transgender athlete, her social media presence has also increased as well. Many people have taken to Twitter and Instagram to post their support for Thomas, but many others have done the opposite.

One swimmer, in particular, has voiced her opinions on Fox News to express her concerns for the future of women athletes. Riley Gaines, a swimmer at the University of Kentucky swim team, has recently made headlines after speaking out about her race against Thomas in the 200-meter-freestyle at the NCAA championships.



Photo: Riley Gaines *Swimming Against the Current*

In an interview with Fox News, Gaines spoke openly about how she believes women's sports should be kept for women and women only. "The feminist movement has gone two directions," Gaines said. "One of which is upholding the original meaning of feminism, which is embracing and empowering women. The other direction has gone where they're now fighting for male inclusion in women's sports, women's spaces."

Gaines considers herself a modern feminist meaning that she acknowledges the respect and equal opportunities that women deserve while ensuring women's spaces are fair and reserved for biological females.

Although Gaines continues to fight against the participation of transgender athletes, she has no personal animosity toward Thomas. Her objection is to the actions of the athletic governing bodies.

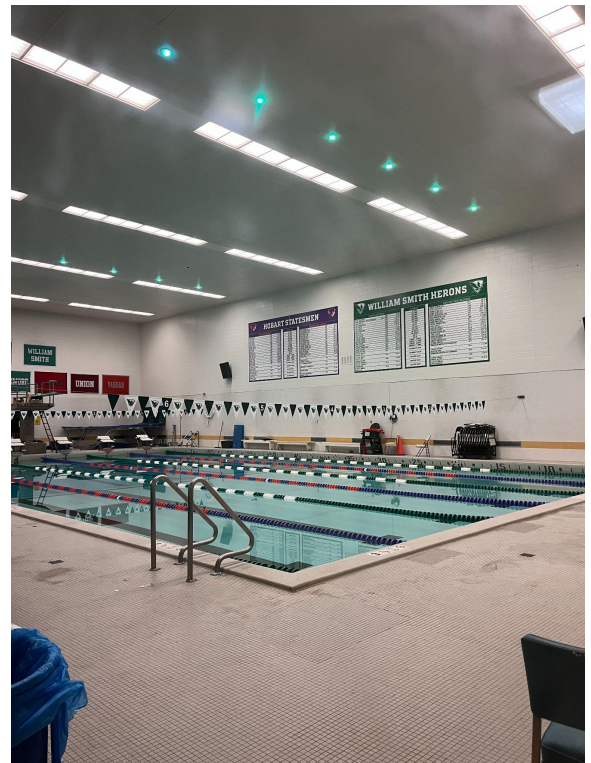
HWS Athletics and Their Views on Transgender Athletes

Aside from the controversy surrounding the science and policies regarding transgender athletes, colleges have other obstacles to worry about. Although many have yet to welcome a transgender athlete onto their campus, they should start preparing for when the time comes.

As a community, HWS welcomes students of all races, genders, and identities. The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion strives for “dignity and respect ensuring that all members of the HWS community have an equal opportunity to thrive”. Within the office, seven other programs stand alongside the DEI: First Generation Initiative, LGBTQ+ Resource Center, Alger Adams '32 Intercultural Center, International Student Success, Opportunity Programs, POSSE, and Title IX.

HWS as a college provides many resources for students who are questioning themselves or are struggling with their identity. The campus has already seen transgender faculty but is HWS Athletics prepared to welcome those who identify differently than others onto a team where there are separate coordinate systems?

Hobart and William Smith became one college in 1943 but still created a divide within the athletics department. Today, HWS Athletics advocates the idea of being “one team”, meaning that Hobart Statesmen and the William Smith Herons should work together to create a community that strives for equality within sports and amongst sports teams. However, would “one team” be the case if a transgender athlete did happen to step onto campus and want to participate in team sports?



A former athlete who wishes to remain anonymous expressed their concern about what the athletics and admissions department would do if there happen to be backlash across campus and within athletics.

“I think that our campus community tends to be very accepting of transgender people or the idea of them. However, if a controversy did come up I don’t think our administration would be prepared to handle it”, they said. “[The Athletics Department] would definitely send an email. I think they would have a meeting with a team that’s affected directly; I doubt they would address the whole athletics.”

Liz Denison has not responded to interview questions.

The Hobart and William Smith Swimming and Dive Team

The William Smith Swim and Dive team has recently welcomed Hobart into their program as this year is the first year they will be able to compete with both men and women. With the recent discussion about Lia Thomas, it would be interesting to see how the team would cope if a transgender swimmer were to step foot onto the pool deck.

“It is interesting in the world of swimming because if you have a man competing against a woman they are going into a new realm with stronger muscles and have more of an edge competitively”, said Clare Burke, a Junior on the Heron’s swim team. “In my personal beliefs how one identifies their gender does not affect me in any way, so in my own world, it shouldn’t matter if one is transgender or not and I’m not going to discriminate.”



Burke hopes that the team will support the athlete and how they identify. She does not have a problem with transgender athletes participating on a sports team but believes that some students and alumni will say something and she is not sure how the athletics and administration department would handle the criticism.

“I think they should be welcomed and feel like they have a team and community and that they are supported”, said a former William Smith swimmer who wishes to remain anonymous.

The former swimmer does have concerns about the challenges that may arise with locker rooms and changing. “I doubt there will be a universal agreement with [locker rooms], but you also don’t want to exclude them. With swimming you have to fully strip and shower, it’s not like other sports where you change shorts or shirts, you are completely naked and it’s evasive,” they said.

The Hobart and William Smith Swim and Dive head coach politely declined an interview.

Although the idea of a transgender athlete coming to HWS seems unrealistic, it could possibly happen in the next couple of years. This means that the school should start implementing workshops and policies that will educate the community on how to welcome transgender students and athletes. Bathrooms and locker rooms should be updated and inclusive to those of all identities.

Not only HWS, but other colleges should start preparing for when the time comes instead of scrambling last minute as many do. According to Outsports.com, 36 transgender athletes are competing openly in colleges. About half of those compete on a Division III college team. It’s time to start thinking about the future of HWS Athletics and how they want to represent their LGBTQ+ community within the department.