**Bruce Jenner Spotlights a Sports Debate**

There is no universal rulebook for athletes who have switched gender

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Suspense over whether Bruce Jenner is transitioning to the female gender is especially keen among transgender athletes and their advocates.

If Jenner were in transition, he would be the highest-profile American athlete—highest-profile American, for that matter—to do so. Transgender advocates hope that his story would shed light on the evolving politics and rules governing transgender athletes.

“We’re all waiting for Bruce Jenner to say something,” said Helen J. Carroll, the sports project director for the National Center for Lesbian Rights. “Sports hasn’t come to the forefront of [transgender] issues yet.”

Jenner, best known recently as the aloof stepfather from the Kardashian reality television shows, won decathlon gold at the 1976 Olympics, a medal that confers upon its bearer the label “World’s Greatest Athlete.” For years following those Games, Jenner was a symbol of American sports prowess, and a fixture on the Wheaties cereal box.

These days Jenner is widely reported to be transitioning his gender from male to female, although he hasn’t confirmed it. Through his publicist, who declined to answer questions, Jenner declined to be interviewed for this story. Media reports say Jenner is waiting to address his gender transition on television.

No openly transgender athlete has competed in the Olympics. And there is no universal rule book for athletes who have switched gender. Different leagues, governing bodies and even state agencies have created different sets of regulations regarding transgender athletes.

The International Olympic Committee in 2004 mandated that transgender athletes must undergo gender reassignment surgery and then undertake two years of hormone therapy before competing. The NCAA, by contrast, doesn’t require surgery, and its 2011 rule book requires transgender females to undergo just one year of hormone suppression therapy. Some state high-school leagues require athletes to self-identify as a specific gender, while others require them to compete under their birth gender.

A few smaller sports leagues have created their own rules. “It’s a real hodgepodge,” Carroll said.

The rules are impacted by politics, but also by the various degrees of gender transition. Transgender people can choose to make no physiological changes and simply identify with their chosen gender. Or they can take hormones or hormone suppressants. Or they can take it a step further and undergo gender reassignment surgery.

The rules and politics center on the competitive advantage that males hold over females in many sports. Hormone therapies and gender reassignment surgery are supposed to create a somewhat even playing field for transgender athletes.

Dr. Eric Vilain, co-director of the UCLA Institute for Society and Genetics, said that achieving complete biological equality, however, is impossible.

“You take a biological male that went through puberty, and that will always be different from a typical female body,” Vilain said. “The concept of having them achieve the full body of a female is impossible.”

Vilain, who helped create the NCAA rules for transgender athletes, believes athletes and regulators need to abandon the concept of biological equality entirely. Instead, Vilain said, they should view gender as a spectrum, not a binary option. So long as a transgender athlete has migrated out of his or her original gender range due to hormone treatment or reassignment surgery, Vilain said, he or she should be allowed to compete.

“The goal is to say these athletes are no longer in the male range of muscle and androgen,” Vilain said. “We should be tolerant of the variations in physiology.”

Historically, the fear of transgender women holding an unfair advantage prompted numerous leagues and competitions to ban them outright.

In 1976 the U.S. Tennis Association barred Renée Richards from competing in the U.S. Open, after learning she had undergone gender reassignment the previous year. The LPGA barred transgender golfer Lana Lawless from competing on the pro tour in 2010. Both the USTA and LPGA have since adopted policies that allow transgender athletes to compete. Richards didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Canadian professional downhill mountain biker Michelle Dumaresq abandoned for good her sport after she was unable to secure adequate sponsorship funding, which she believes was due to her transgender identity.

“Until there is money to support professional trans athletes, we won’t see real change,” Dumaresq said.

In 2014, transgender Californian Chloie Jonsson sued the workout company CrossFit after a representative informed her via email that she could only compete in the men’s category at the annual CrossFit Games, the series’ pinnacle competition. A subsequent letter from CrossFit’s lawyers stated that, “Based upon her being born as a male, she will need to compete in the Men’s Division.”

CrossFit’s lawyers said that CrossFit wouldn't prevent her from competing as a woman at lesser CrossFit events, as she had already done. But for the CrossFit Games, CrossFit lawyers argued that the birth gender requirement was needed to “Preserve the fairness and integrity of the physical competition.”

“I’m 5 foot 4” and I weigh 140 pounds—that’s not abnormal” for the female category, said Jonsson, who underwent gender surgery in 2006.

The two parties are currently in the discovery phase of the lawsuit.

By comparison, transgender boys and men who were born female rarely receive scrutiny when they compete against other males.

“Everyone assumed I wouldn’t be as competitive,” said triathlete Chris Mosier, who transitioned to male in 2010.

That hasn’t been the case. As a man, Mosier won two duathlon races in 2014 and qualified to compete in the U.S. triathlon national championships. Since Mosier takes regular androgen, he’s had to register for a Therapeutic Use Exemption from the U.S. Anti Doping Agency, which monitors his testosterone levels to make sure they don’t exceed the allowable limit.

Mosier, who operates the website Transathlete.com, believes hormone therapy can create an even playing field, even for athletes who forego surgeries.

“Not every trans person wants to have surgery,” Mosier said. “The [rules] force people to modify their bodies in a way that they may not be comfortable with.”

Following the rules doesn’t always save a transgender athlete from a public lashing. Fallon Fox underwent surgery and started hormone treatment two years before picking up the sport of mixed martial arts. When Fox became competitive, she sparked a public debate that prompted the Association of Boxing Commissions to adopt a policy similar to the IOC’s.

Fox is in compliance with the rules. Still, she still faces regular vitriol from the public, and occasionally from competitors.

“As soon as I came out people started saying unconscionable things,” Fox said.

After Fox beat fighter Tamikka Brents by technical knockout this past September, Brents told an MMA media website that she believed Fox was unfairly strong. Brents said she stands by those comments, but she otherwise declined to be interviewed for the story.

Fox believes her strength and conditioning comes from her intense training regimen, not her birth gender. She stands 5-foot 7 inches, and her competition weight is 135 pounds, which is similar to other female fighters. During the first years of her transition, Fox said she could feel a decrease in overall strength due to the testosterone suppressants and surgery.

“The strength gains I got before, those weren’t there anymore, and my endurance changed dramatically,” Fox said.

Carroll said that transgender athletes should follow Fox’s lead and simply follow the rules and strive for results. Whether Jenner’s possible transition sheds light on their world or not, mainstream acceptance, she believes, will slowly build.

“It’s an equality movement,” she said.