

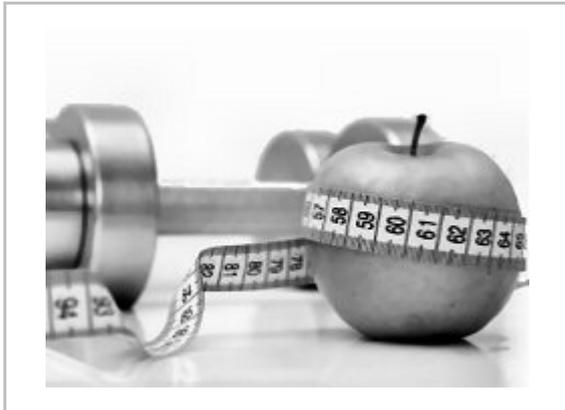
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# Transwomen in Sport

## An Interview with Transgender Athlete, Lauren Stewart

by Cassandra Guidice

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**Cassandra:** What insights have you been able to glean about the participation of transwomen in sport?

**Lauren:** According to a number of women I have spoken to, sport and group physical activity allowed them to finally feel connected with themselves and aided their transition.

These women were finally able to be true to who they are and be involved in a sport and group physical activity that interested them. Both sport and group physical activity were seen as facilitators to feeling connected with not only

other people, but with oneself.

While sport and group physical activity allowed all of these women an opportunity to improve their physical and mental health as well as build social networks that persisted beyond the activity, itself every woman I have spoken to agreed that Australian sporting organisations do not do enough for the transgender population.

Australia's transgender population are not silent, in fact they are very vocal even though they are one of the most marginalised demographics in our society. There needs to be more done for sport involvement of this group.

It's great that so many organisations have created legislation saying that trans people are entitled to play, but what good is that if they do not feel welcome?

There is still a stigma surrounding some sports and in order for it to change there has to be a discussion, an open door to talk about these issues.

**Cassandra:** Do you perceive that there is discrimination against trans women in sport? Are you able to offer any insights concerning the perception of transwomen in sport and their experience of discrimination in sporting arenas? Can you give any examples?

**Lauren:** There is certainly still discrimination against trans women in sport. Even though we are starting to see progress with legislation, public awareness and acceptance there is still a lot of improvement needed.

One of the main reasons that transwomen face discrimination in sport is due to the myth of their having a physical advantage. A lot of trans women are forced to explain and defend themselves because of the misguided idea that they have a physical advantage over genetic women due to testosterone levels.

What the public is unaware about is that hormone therapy actually suppresses testosterone levels. For example: one woman I spoke to loved playing tennis but other people at the club complained about how she kept winning because of her unfair 'advantage'. The club decided that she could only continue to play if she swapped from playing with her right arm to her left. It took multiple meetings and the involvement of doctors before situation was corrected and she was allowed to play right-handed. Once people were educated and aware that transwoman do not have an advantage almost every transwomen was accepted and welcomed.

My research has shown that sporting environments can help facilitate transwomen and gives them an opportunity to not only improve their health physically and mentally but also to increase their social connection within their community.

**Cassandra:** Do you think that trans people are more or less active than the rest of the population? Is obesity a problem for trans people?

**Lauren:** The type of active lifestyle differs quite a lot for trans people from the rest of the Australian population. A large number of trans people restrict themselves to solo exercise for a variety of reasons. Some feel unsafe, unwelcome or they are unsure of where they are able to go to compete or engage in physical activities with other people.

***One of the most surprising things that came out of my research with trans women in sport ... was the impact and role it plays on their voice and vocal communication.***

Over the years we have seen an increase of trans people competing more within sporting environments. The exact numbers are unknown because not everybody wishes to identify as trans or be open to others as trans for a variety of reasons which is completely their choice.

I would not say that obesity is a concern for trans people, whilst they may be at higher risk of gaining weight due to the effect of hormone therapy. This can easily be avoided with regular exercise and a healthy eating lifestyle just like any other person.

**Cassandra:** Do trans people participate in sport more, or less, after their transition?

**Lauren:** I would say that trans people participate in sport and group physical activity almost equally before and after their transition for a variety of reasons. From my research we have learned that sport and group physical activity environments were used to help create and maintain a character before transition for quite a number of people.

Australia has such a strong sporting culture and a lot of trans people that I have spoken to acknowledged that it was almost the perfect way to blend into society because by playing sports that were typical for one's biological gender they believed it would stop their family, friends and community from questioning them.

In contrast sport and group physical activity allows a lot of trans people to not only keep fit and active after their transition but allows them to make connections with people who share similar interests and build those friendships. The real issue for sport participation is during the transition phase.

There is a great necessity for programs and support services during this time period and a lot of trans people become inactive or revert to solo exercise during this phase because they have nowhere to go where they are welcome nor safe.

**Cassandra:** Do you have any insights/observations about the participation of transwomen in sport/exercise more generally? In your research have transwomen made any observations/comments about their diet and how that is affected by hormonal changes?

**Lauren:** This will always vary with every person. Some may crave more food while others prefer less. However, with most of the women I spoke to with my research they found that they were gaining weight and losing muscle mass once that started hormone therapy.

This was because they were eating more, especially unhealthy, foods which they usually would not eat but due to both cravings and the changes within their body this was happening.

This weight gain in turn led a lot of these women to begin exercising to improve their body image and self-esteem. Most of the women I spoke to highlighted the need to keep physically active due to the effects that the hormones were having on them both physically and mentally.

Achieving congruency between their self-identified gender and biological sex takes a massive toll on a trans individuals both physically and mentally. The changes to one's body are foreign; health and body image were major concerns for every person I have spoken to.

**Cassandra:** What else can you tell us about the participation of transwomen in sport?

**Lauren:** One of the most surprising things that came out of my research with trans women in sport and group physical activity is the impact and role it plays on their voice and vocal communication. A common strategy amongst transwomen to increase adherence and encourage themselves to practise their vocal skills was through their engagement at their respective clubs and/or classes. The women discussed how constant interaction with a wide variety of people supported their attainment of female communicative behaviours, through receiving positive affirmations of their communication abilities from class/team-mates. This reinforcement was in relation to their appearance, voice and body language.

Being given the opportunity to practice female communicative behaviours during practice, games and club functions was considered to be important by participants, as this allowed them an opportunity to successfully communicate. My research also revealed that being around predominately female sporting and/or classroom environments allowed transwomen to consciously and subconsciously learn how to communicate as females. They explained that they observed how other women speak, the language they use, the emotion and articulation of conversation in a real life setting, resulting in an improvement of their own feminine communication.

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