



# NOTHING'S (UN)FAIR IN LOVE AND WEIGHTLIFTING

## THE CASE FOR TRANS INCLUSION

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It's time for us to say it out loud: Weightlifting as an Olympic sport has an inclusion problem. It always has. For a sport that considers itself one of the most democratic in the world because it has 192 National Federations worldwide, its track record for inclusion lags woefully behind other sports and society writ large. Women were not allowed to compete

at the World Championships until [1987](#), and astonishingly, were not included in the Olympics until the Sydney Games in [2000](#). To put this into perspective, women have competed at the Olympic Games as early as [1900](#). When it comes to gender equality, Olympic weightlifting is a full century behind.

If you think things are better in 2021, we invite you to simply visit and compare the comment sections on any social media post for the current male and female superheavyweight world champions and record holders Lasha Talakhadze and Li Wenwen. Hint: most comments on one praise the competitor's athleticism, whereas the other is full of judgement for how the competitor's body looks. We'll let you guess which one is which.

At the Tokyo Games this month, Weightlifting has an unique opportunity to break another gendered barrier with the inclusion of the [first ever](#) transgender Olympian, New Zealand's Laurel Hubbard. However, reception to her inclusion has been replete with resistance, criticism, and outright abuse. The Australian Weightlifting Federation sought to [block](#) her participation at the 2018 Commonwealth Games in Gold Coast, but the petition was denied by the organizers. The Prime Minister of Samoa [spoke out](#) against her inclusion in the women's division by insisting on the grounds that she is a 'biological man' after the 2019 Pacific Games. And a New Zealand based lobby group maintains that Hubbard is a male competing in women's sport, which they claim is '[blatantly unfair](#)'. This is to not even mention all the vitriol spouted on social media channels and the pages of prominent individuals within the Weightlifting and wider sports community.

Arguments against the inclusion of transgender competitors are all variations on the same line of reasoning – fairness: that people assigned male at birth, especially ones who have undergone the physiological changes of puberty will, on average, develop better athletic advantages than people assigned female at birth. According to the argument, all else being equal, an athlete who medically transitions will always be superior to cisgender female athletes. We have good reasons to doubt that this is the case, given the influence of medical transition on [muscle mass and bone density](#). But here's the kicker: all else was never equal. Elite level Weightlifting has never been predicated on equal ability. The argument fails before it even takes off the ground.

Elite sports have long praised the biological advantages granted by certain bodies. Standing at 7'1", the legendary Shaquille O'Neal has an undoubted advantage over others—even within basketball, which already boasts an average height well into the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of the world population. As for Michael Phelps, his Olympic swimming dominance can be traced to his unusually large torso, short legs, double jointed ankles, and low lactic acid production. Like most elite athletes, their competitiveness is derived from biological advantages— often boasting traits that are far rarer than being transgender ([~1 in 172](#)).

David Epstein famously argued that elite level competitors aren't performing better over time because of advances in training methodology or technology, but because we've simply gotten better at [selecting](#) them based on genetic and biological traits for the particular sports in which they're involved. From a fairness standpoint, most people simply do not have the genetic make-up to be Olympic athletes. And yet, while most elite athletes' advantages are considered natural and praised, those imputed to trans women are labelled unfair and shunned.

A major reason for this differential treatment lies in the normative underpinnings of what we consider natural. What we consider natural isn't objective, but instead reflects a social judgment. When it comes to gender, 'natural' is defined by a narrow set of parameters that are constrained by prevailing conceptions of gender. Women who are intersex, like [Caster Semenya](#), and women who are trans, like Laurel Hubbard, are considered less legitimate as women than their competitors because they challenge longstanding preconceptions of what it means to be a woman. Because they aren't perceived as real women, advantages that would be praised in other women are lambasted as unnatural and unfair. What makes being a trans woman (~1 in 172) any more unfair than being a 5'11" cis woman (~1 in 197)? Neither is something you have control over.

But even these arguments still proceed from the assumption that trans women have noticeable athletic advantages. As pointed out earlier, medical transition is associated with [substantial losses](#) in muscle mass and bone density, among other changes. [Studies show](#) that trans women who used to be in the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile of male runners tend to be around the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile of female runners after transitioning. Critics will sometimes point out that the [10 nmol/L](#) total testosterone requirement imposed on trans women who participate in the Olympics is well above the normal female range. However, it is important to understand that trans women typically fall far below that threshold.

Hormone therapy aims to lower testosterone and raise estrogen to typical female ranges, since the goal is to alter secondary sexual characteristics associated with sexual hormones. Because estrogen suppresses testosterone, it is not possible to benefit from estrogen's effects—e.g., breast tissue and fat redistribution—without simultaneously impacting testosterone. Furthermore, some of the aims of hormone therapy like reducing facial hair depend on low testosterone. For that reason, most trans women have total testosterone levels far below 10 nmol/L. And those who have had genital surgery have testosterone levels below those of cis women, since ovaries produce testosterone. Furthermore, testosterone levels are not a reliable proxy for athletic performance.

Contrary to what we would expect, low testosterone is overrepresented among elite male athletes and, in fact, [the majority](#) of elite male Powerlifters in one study had low testosterone. Testosterone levels do not show consistent correlation with performance, even in strength events. As we would expect from a random effect, people with high testosterone [fare better](#) at some sports whereas they [fare worse](#) at others. If testosterone isn't a reliable proxy for performance, why is there a gender gap, then?

Multiple answers can be offered. The first one is that the performance gap is driven less by biological potential than investment and support. Social incentives and funding of male athletes is simply out of proportion with that of female athletes. While Lasha Talakhadze is praised, Li Wenwen is criticized as unwomanly. While the NCAA provides a giant March Madness training room to men, women get a tiny weights rack [hidden in the corner](#). This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that Olympic records have been progressively improving as sports training, diet, technologies advance, despite little ongoing human evolution.

The second possible answer is that while testosterone plays a significant role in athletic performance, it does so in a way that does not correlate with endogenous hormone levels. Testosterone's effects are not only a question of how much testosterone has

in their body, but also how receptive their cells are to testosterone—hence androgen insensitivity syndrome. This would account for why adding or removing testosterone from someone's body has an impact on strength even though endogenous hormone levels do not correlate with strength. Both reasons probably contribute to the gender performance gap and, importantly, both favor trans women's participation in elite sports since they are disadvantaged by both transphobia and exogenous testosterone suppression.

If the argument against the inclusion of trans athletes is founded in conjecture and not supported by strong evidence, where does it come from? Oftentimes, it is based on the slippery slope fallacy, according to which allowing a single trans person to participate in sports will open the floodgate and prevent cis women from ever winning. The argument is bogus. Not only do athletes with significant biological advantages not win every event, but trans women have yet to even reach the Olympics despite being allowed since 2004. Laurel Hubbard's IWF rankings going into the Tokyo Games puts her best total at [8<sup>th</sup>](#) in the world, which is a far-cry from the podium. For a group that is ~1 in 172 of the population, trans women are hardly dominant.

The rhetoric of trans women being dangerous to cis women is far from new. Trans women have long been cast as [predators](#) to justify

human rights violations. When the claim was disproven, opponents started saying that trans women aren't predators but that predators would abuse trans inclusion—the same thing people used to claim to oppose same-sex adoption. How many times have we heard athletes claim that the coming Olympics will set the precedent that any man can medically transition to easily win medals against women? The logic is patently absurd: who would put their body through drastic changes, face widespread harassment, discrimination, and violence, and risk losing their family, friends, and community just to win a weightlifting medal?. Just like earlier stances against bathroom inclusion, the argument completely obscures the real and grave challenges faced by trans people and associates them with predatoriness and opportunism.

We would be remiss if we did not highlight the irony and hypocrisy in decrying trans

inclusion on the grounds of fairness. Is it not cis athletes, coaches, and officials who are responsible for the endemic doping, bribery, and [corruption](#) in Weightlifting? The IOC has signaled its willingness to cut Weightlifting from the Olympics, and yet the IWF continues to drag its feet in making much-needed changes. With the uncertainty of the sport's inclusion in the [2024 Paris Games](#), Tokyo could very well be the last time the sport retains an Olympic designation. Blaming trans athletes for the sport's fairness issues is a massive swing and a miss, a distracting scapegoat for the severe fairness problems that plague Weightlifting. Trans athletes are not here to steal medals from other competitors, they are here to play sports [as is their human right](#). We do, however, have an endless list of actual cheaters to deal with. As Weightlifting is on track to break the barrier of trans inclusion at the Olympics, we must ask ourselves: what legacy do we want to leave behind?