LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

LET THEM PLAY

Three recent books make the case that welcoming trans athletes can help improve sports culture for all.

by **JESSICA LUTHER**
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(Illustration by Adrià Voltà)

In their book released this January, *Fair Game: Trans Athletes and the Future of Sports*, authors Ellie Roscher and Anna Baeth offer a distressing encapsulation of the extent to which recent laws and policies have severely limited and even denied transgender athletes access to sports. "When we started this project in 2023, we interviewed twenty transgender people … about their experiences playing sports across a range of ages and playing levels. At that time all twenty of those athletes were able to play and compete," they write. Three years later, "Only five of our interviewees are still legally able to participate in sports. Every athlete in our study under the age of thirty-two has been banned from participating."

The swiftness and scope of these bans is breathtaking. While the legal and organizational moves to push trans athletes out of sports are only one part of a larger project to curtail trans people's ability to live their lives as they want and need, or even to eradicate them from public life altogether, sports play

an important role because so many Americans need little evidence or convincing to believe that trans athletes do not belong.

Because sports have a built-in gender binary at the center of their organizational structure, gender-expansive athletes—trans, intersex, and nonbinary—who challenge that setup are immediately seen as a threat. Further, the binary sports structure is also a hierarchy: Men have historically been and continue to be better resourced, receiving more TV time and media coverage, higher salaries, and scientific research, while getting hired into coaching and leadership positions more than their women counterparts. This is a manufactured scarcity for women in sports that has misogyny at its root, but it is one nonetheless. So when gender-expansive athletes push on the binary, an easy way to dismiss them is to suggest they are taking from the little that women have. No evidence needed. And once the majority has decided a marginalized group is the demon in one part of a story, it's easier to paint them as demons in another.

To counter this, we need to look at the topic of gender-expansive athletes in a detailed and holistic way that takes the humanity and lives of those athletes seriously. Luckily, over the past three years, three books have been published that do just this.



(ILLUSTRATION BY TEXAS OBSERVER STAFF)

The first was 2023's *Fair Play: How Sports Shape the Gender Debates* by Katie Barnes. A journalist at ESPN, Barnes has been covering gender-expansive athletes since 2018, which means they (Barnes' pronouns are they/them) have been covering this topic longer and more comprehensively than almost anyone else. It's not surprising then that *Fair Play* is a good, well-written on-ramp.

Before diving into trans athletes specifically, Barnes first addresses the misogyny at the heart of most sporting structures, which led to women being excluded from sporting spaces historically and then, once included, left them dealing with assumptions about their sexual identities (i.e., the idea that women who play sports are lesbians). Then Barnes introduces Caster Semenya, a Black South African middle-distance phenom who was born and raised as a girl. But, as she succeeded, Semenya's gender was questioned. World Athletics, which oversees track and field, found that Semenya had "high levels of natural, or endogenous, testosterone," Barnes writes, and the organization wanted her to suppress it to a level that would force her into the women's category as defined by the oversight body.

This came even as, Barnes writes, "The science of the advantage of testosterone is not as straightforward as we would assume it to be." While there is plenty of science about testosterone's effects on bodies, there's not much data on how that translates to athletic performance specifically. Though important, testosterone is but one part of the cocktail that determines what makes someone good at a particular sport. "A person's testosterone level," Barnes writes, "does not determine athletic outcomes."

Barnes tells the stories of a few high-profile trans athletes (there are only so many). Since Barnes was reporting on these athletes while they were competing, they are able to paint rich scenes for the reader, then contextualize those within the larger landscape. Mack Beggs, a trans boy wrestler in Texas, was forced to wrestle against, and ultimately defeat, girls because of a state rule (then law) that says schoolchildren must compete in the category to which they were assigned at birth. Beggs' was a big story, certainly, but it was Andraya Yearwood, a Black trans girl runner in Connecticut, who became a major flashpoint in the national conversation after she achieved some success. "Yearwood has been pointed to in bill after

bill after bill" across the country, Barnes writes, "as the reason why restricting access to sports for transgender kids is necessary."

Then came Lia Thomas, the Ivy League swimmer who won a race at an NCAA event in early 2022, a story Barnes covered as it unfolded. The coverage of Thomas was "constant and increasingly aggressive in tone," they write, and it coincided with "more legislative measures restricting the participation of transgender athletes." Thomas, who followed the NCAA policy exactly, also showed how, for many people, policies are good enough only until a trans athlete wins: "The fact that Thomas was able to swim and to win races in the women's category meant the policy was broken."

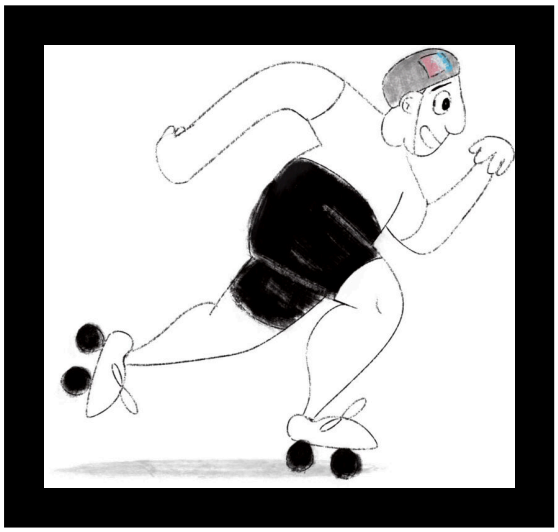
Barnes, in attempting to answer the question of what they do think is fair, lays out big-picture but nuanced prescriptions. "My bright line concerns transgender youth. … I cannot accept a system that would allow for transgender youth to be affirmed in the classroom but be othered on a sports team." They believe recreational and intramural sports should be without limitations; for high school and college, they're willing to consider some restrictions.

At the elite level, it gets more complicated for Barnes, who writes that there are always more "strict rules and regulations" for those athletes, "so it would make sense to me that a similar level of scrutiny be applied to questions of eligibility in gendered categories." They could also see different considerations if an athlete is on a team or competing as an individual. Still, at all levels, they want "a path to participation" for gender-expansive athletes.

Overall, Barnes is adamant that while attempting to make sports fair is a worthy idea, "The reality of sports is that we accept unfairness all the time." In the end, what Barnes wants is "a more gender-inclusive sporting culture at young ages" because it "is better for all kids of all genders."

L*et Us Play: Winning the Battle for Gender Diverse Athletes*, a 2025 addition to this discourse by Harrison Browne, a transgender athlete who played professional hockey, and his sister and investigative journalist Rachel Browne, covers similar ground to *Fair Play.* But Harrison brings a specific point of view to the topic. He played first on the women's team at the University of Maine, then in the National Women's Hockey League.

"By 2016, when I was playing professionally in Buffalo," he writes in the introduction for *Let Us Play*, "I didn't want to hide anymore and decided to come out publicly as a trans man." He later retired from hockey before beginning hormone treatments and entering "the world of storytelling through acting and writing" (side note: You can see him **as a hockey player** in the blockbuster show *Heated Rivalry*).



(TEXAS OBSERVER STAFF)

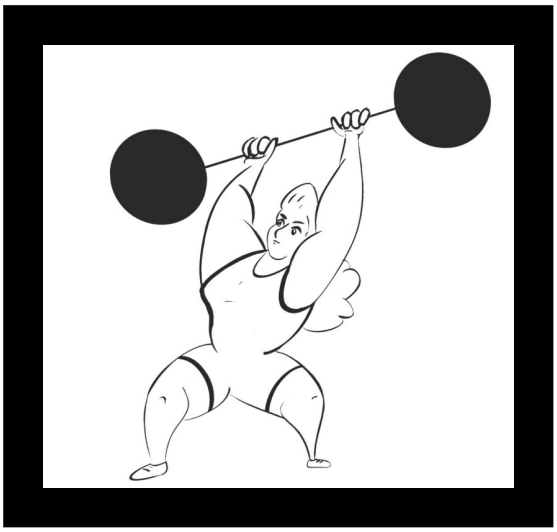
Let Us Play focuses on the stories of gender-expansive athletes and the arguments against inclusive policies. The authors consider the current moment to be a moral panic. According to the Brownes, such panics target "misunderstood, marginalized, and vulnerable people in the name of safety, purity, and, of course, morality." They estimate that trans kids are "a mere .44 percent of high school athletes," yet "Bans against trans women and girls in sports have now become one of the most successful anti-LGBTQ+ policies being pursued in the US."

These bans are "an entry point to attacking the rights of all LGBTQ+ people and must be viewed as part of the larger political project of the right," they write.

The authors argue that understanding trans athletes is necessary to broaden "inclusion and acceptance within sports and beyond," and this includes questioning of "gender segregation and traditional heteronormative roles across all sports." They see discussions of "fairness" as placing a spotlight on

gender-expansive athletes to “divert attention away from the haves and have-nots in the athletic community, regardless of gender identity” because “It’s a lot easier to target someone’s gender identity than it is to discuss more complex issues regarding privilege and oppression.”

The Brownes are concerned, instead, about inequality between men’s and women’s sports and the amount of “abuse, especially sexual abuse, faced by women athletes” around the world. Additionally, debates about trans inclusion often ignore how “enforcement of these policies inevitably leads to more surveillance of women’s bodies, both cisgender and trans.”



(TEXAS OBSERVER STAFF)

Like Barnes, the Brownes interrogate the role of testosterone and other sex hormones in the discussion around trans athletes. They write that there is even some research that suggests that “trans women are at a disadvantage in relation to cisgender women in some categories of athletic ability.” One study, which they describe as both “groundbreaking” and “contentious,” found that while trans women had “better handgrip strength, they also had lower cardiovascular fitness and jumping abilities compared to the cisgender women.” They fear, though, that the lack of research that already exists on trans athletes will be made worse by restrictive policies: “In the eventuality of trans athletes, an already minuscule population, decreasing in number, so too will the number of potential study participants.”

Let Us Play dedicates a section of the book to trans youth and how important it is to allow them access to sports. The authors note that “trans-inclusive sports programs for youth improve the participation rates of cisgender youth, especially girls.” That’s because a welcoming environment makes everyone feel more comfortable. *Let Us Play* proposes more mixed-gender sports and teams and an “inclusion-first mentality,” as opposed to “a scarcity mentality.”

Roscher and Baeth found themselves in the unenviable position of publishing *Fair Game* after both *Fair Play* and *Let Us Play* were out, but there can hardly be too many books that push back on the transphobic misinformation surrounding this topic.

Roscher is a writer, educator, and former athlete. Baeth is a critical feminist scholar, a "cultural studies practitioner of sport," and the director of research at **Athlete Ally**, an organization that supports LGBTQ+ athletes.

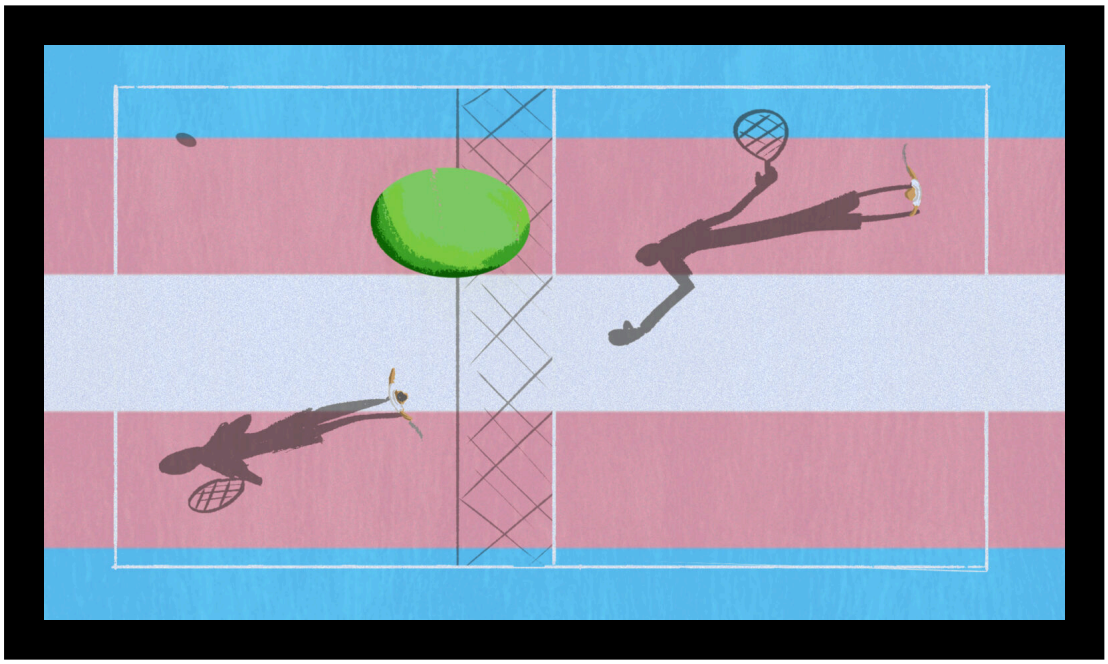
Roscher and Baeth are interested in showing how "The ongoing marginalization of trans athletes isolates young athletes, including cisgender girls and cisgender boys, from experiencing healthy sports climates." They're also very critical of the current sports landscape. Investing so much time and energy trying to keep gender-expansive athletes out of sports, and specifically trans girls and women out of women's sports, they argue, is part of a larger misogynistic project. In this setup, "Women's sports [remain] a patriarchal tool."

Fair Game also discusses how the science around human bodies is more complicated than the stories we tell about them. "Human physiology is complex, and sex, according to scientists, doctors, and researchers, is better thought of as a series of spectrums, a constellation, or a mosaic." If we are going to spend so much time focusing on "assumed physical advantage for trans athletes," they write, "We also need to look at the fact that there are arguably mental, emotional, physical, and psychological advantages to being cis that affect athletic performance." In a transphobic world, "There is an ease to being cis that is hard to evaluate but could arguably be a competitive advantage, and it is an ease that cis folks often take for granted." Roscher and Baeth want a fuller, truer picture of what counts as an advantage in sport.

The way that Roscher and Baeth weave in the stories of the 20 trans athletes they interviewed for *Fair Game* is their most novel contribution. There is Dew, a trans boy who lives in the South and powerlifts. Su is a trans woman ultrarunner, and Al is a boy who loves to swim. Starlet is a woman who golfs, and Avery plays hockey. They tell each of their stories, injecting statistics

we've seen before alongside everyday trans sporting experiences. And the authors focus on the joy, comfort, and ease that these trans athletes find in doing sports, a gift in a society that often belittles trans experience. Lennox, a trans athlete who competed in Division I soccer, says, "Playing soccer was the only place where my body felt accepted." In perhaps the best lines of *Fair Game*, Addison, a trans woman powerlifter, recounts, "This body can do incredible things. This culture is the problem. My body is limitless."

All three of these books are heavy reads. They document harm. They explain how misinformation is being weaponized against a marginalized group, many of whom are children, and they suggest that things will get worse before they get better. The most affirming part of each book is hearing from and about the many gender-expansive athletes who love sports, are trying to make space within current sporting spaces, and are dreaming of better sporting communities in the future. There is such deep humanity in all of this.



(TEXAS OBSERVER STAFF)

In black ink on white pages, these three books lay out in detail the world we have currently built and the harm it is doing. But a fourth work on the subject shows, in comparatively bursting color, what a better sporting world can look like.

Come Out and Play: The Queer Sports Project, an edited comics anthology by Meghan Kemp-Gee and Megan Praz, assembles contributions—"fiction,

nonfiction, and the weird gray area in-between"—from five continents. Andy Casadonte's "Like a Lonely Soul on Fire" opens the collection with a story about how one boy's crush on another got him into running, and how he still thinks of him whenever he goes out for a run years later. Mac Crane writes and Praz illustrates "Run It Back," about rival women basketballers and ex-girlfriends who are playing against each other in the first round of the NCAA Tournament. Dave Davenport's contribution is about a two-week trip camping, hiking, and riding mountain bikes alongside his then-partner. Other tales touch on the gay rodeo circuit of the 1990s, roller derby, and more.

All together, these books press us to question what we take for granted and to open our hearts and minds to new possibilities. This is something that all who truly care about athletics and justice must do. As Roscher and Baeth write, "The current system is not enough. Trans and nonbinary athletes are asking us to look with them and see a more creative, vibrant sporting community." Another world is possible, it is beautiful, and we should fight for it.