

# Coaches, Parents Question Policy For High School Transgender Athletes



**Andraya Yearwood**  
Cromwell High School Track Athlete

Andraya Yearwood, a transgender track athlete of Cromwell High School, discusses competing in this file video. Yearwood (pictured while she was a freshman) is now a sophomore at Cromwell.



By **Lori Riley**

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**T**he success of transgender female athletes participating in high school track and field events has parents, athletes and coaches in some communities calling for a change in the current rules, as they question a possible competitive advantage.

The **Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference**, which governs high school sports in the state, allows athletes to compete in the gender specific sport in which they identify. Continued success by transgender athletes has prompted two petitions — one started in **Glastonbury** and another in

**Plainville** — from critics who say transgender athletes have an advantage. Together, the petitions have about 150 signatures, though neither has been submitted to CIAC officials.

“I think it’s unfair to the girls who work really hard to do well and qualify for Opens and New Englands,” said Glastonbury sophomore sprinter Selina Soule, who finished sixth in the 100-meter State Open final Monday. “These girls, they’re just coming in and beating everyone. I have no problem with them wanting to be a girl.”

Bianca Stanescu, Soule’s mother, has been circulating a petition at track meets calling on the state legislature to require athletes to compete in sports based on their gender at birth, unless the athlete has undergone hormone therapy.

She had collected about 60 signatures as of Monday and said it’s a problem “that has to be corrected.” Among the signatures was Glastonbury girls track coach Brian Collins, who told The Courant he just wants “an even playing field.” The other petition was started by Jarmaine Lee, a father of two Plainville boys runners. The petition, which was sent to all of the high school athletic directors in the state, had 88 “supporters” Monday.

But advocates for greater inclusion of transgender athletes — along with other competitors in Connecticut — reject the positions being taken by those calling for a rule change as narrow and discriminatory.

In addition to the fact that transgender athletes are following the CIAC policy, Erin Buzuvis, a law professor who is the director of the Center of Gender and Sexuality Studies at Western New England College and who researches and writes about gender and LGBT discrimination in education and athletics, said gender inclusion is important.

“A transgender girl is a girl and ought to be treated like a girl,” Buzuvis said. “If you start to put limitations or exclusions on their participation, not only do you run the risk of violating state anti-discrimination law, but also you are disregarding and disrespecting a population of students based on a core aspect of their identity, which is something that schools should not be in the practice of doing.

“I understand that it appears to many people as an inequitable playing field, but they don’t have any context or knowledge about how that athlete’s life would be if she weren’t transgender. And it would be possible she’d be beating their daughters if she was cisgender (someone who identifies with their birth sex).”

The debate in Connecticut track circles started last year when Cromwell sprinter Andraya Yearwood began winning races, eventually taking first in the girls 100- and 200-meter races at the Class M

championships. Yearwood, who openly spoke with The Courant about her gender identity, was a biological boy who identified as a girl and had yet to undergo hormone treatment at the time. There are now multiple transgender athletes competing in high school track.

“The elephant in the room is when winning and losing comes into play,” CIAC executive director Karissa Niehoff said. “Folks will say it’s not about winning and losing. But when a situation rises to the forefront, it’s generally when there’s a situation involving winning and losing and it doesn’t feel good.”

The CIAC follows the state statute, which defines gender as gender identity and not the biological sex of the person. Athletes are required to update school records to have their paperwork reflect the gender with which they identify. The CIAC also mandates that school officials verify the athlete’s gender identification and ensure “that the expression of the student’s gender identity is bona fide and not for the purpose of gaining an unfair advantage in competitive athletics.”

The CIAC bylaws go on to state that students cannot participate in nor try out for gender specific teams that do not match their gender identity. And once “the issue of gender identity has been addressed by the student and the school district, the determination shall remain consistent for the remainder of the student’s high school sports eligibility.”

The policy is different on the college level, where transgender females are required to complete hormone treatment for a year before competing. Internationally, testosterone testing is required.

“We’ve had conversations with the Office of Civil Rights, with lawyers, we’ve looked at policies at the international level and the collegiate level,” Niehoff said. “It’s a situation that’s very complex. Especially when everybody supports kids.

“When you get into the NCAA, there are scholarships. It’s a more high stakes game. The kids are 18 and older; they’re adults and it’s a different conversation. But with high school students, we’re trying to protect them and all of their civil rights.”

There are sometimes concerns when it comes to transitioning, according to Robin McHaelen, executive director of True Colors, a Hartford-based non-profit which provides services to LGBTQ youth.

“Young people, they often don’t have access to hormonal intervention,” McHaelen said. “Even puberty blockers — for some kids, it’s appropriate. And for some, it’s not.”

But Betty Remigino-Knapp says cis females are at a biological disadvantage. Remigino-Knapp, a former UConn track and cross country coach, is now an assistant track coach at Hall High School who spent 20 years as the West Hartford school athletic director.

“I have great empathy for all transgender kids,” Remigino-Knapp said. “I don’t object to it morally at all. I think the issue at hand is the inequity — if you are a biological male you have an advantage because of testosterone. It’s a proven medical fact. I think our female student-athletes and our coaches feel there’s no longer a level playing field.”

RHAM sprinter Bridget Lalonde finished third in the 100-meter dash just behind Yearwood at the State Open Monday and didn’t take issue with transgender runners.

“To be honest, I think it’s great they get a chance to compete and as long as they’re happy, I guess there’s not that much I can do,” she said. “The rules are the rules. The only competition is the clock because you can only run as fast as you can run.”

Biological advantage can also vary, according to Dr. Myron Genel, a Yale professor emeritus of pediatric endocrinology and a consultant to the [International Olympic Committee](#)’s Medical Commission on issues relating to gender identity in elite athletic competition. Because young males, in general, mature later than females, a natal male (a person born a biological male) may not necessarily have an advantage over a natal female depending on the age of the person and their development.

“There is no such thing as a level playing field,” Genel said. “Athletes succeed because in part of special traits they have or traits that others may not share. Or they had the good fortune of having good training facilities and a good training program.

“You cannot necessarily assume any one of these girls is succeeding because they have not fully converted their gender. I say this without knowing these kids but it may have nothing to do with it.”

As questions persist, the issue leaves the schools, the conferences they play in and the athletes themselves — both transgender and cisgender — in a challenging position, especially because of privacy issues and the age of the students.

Niehoff and Southern Connecticut Conference commissioner Al Carbone said the transgender policy has been discussed thoroughly by the CIAC board and at the conference level.

“We live in a world that should embrace everybody. It’s tough enough to be a kid as it is, without bullying, regardless of what you identify as. It’s a cruel world we live in. But now it’s more about, ‘I’m

coming in here and succeeding,' which is great. But, wait, where did you come from? How did this happen? We live in a win and lose society and there are only so many opportunities you have to compete at the highest level whatever level you get to. And that's what rankles people."

**Editor's note:** *The rules under which transgender athletes are allowed to compete in high school sporting events in Connecticut have come under renewed scrutiny, sparked in part by the recent success of one athlete. Critics of the policy say it is unfair to cis girls, as it forces them to compete against athletes with higher levels of testosterone.*

*The Courant has also been criticized for not mentioning the athlete's gender identity as part of its sports coverage.*

*Our decision follows extensive discussion and debate among reporters and editors here. While some felt it was central to our mission to deliver a complete accounting of this issue – including the athlete's name – in the end we have opted to report on the issue and the debate around the rules but not single out any single athlete for scrutiny.*

*Why?*

*First, there are no rules being broken. The Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference allows a high school athlete to compete according to the gender they identify with. There are no requirements in Connecticut, as there are at the NCAA, for example, for a trans female athlete to be undergoing hormone therapy. Many experts, in fact, argue that requiring a teenager to undergo hormone therapy might be developmentally or medically inappropriate.*

*Second, the big picture issue here is the policy and the standards, not any individual athlete. There may well be many transgender girls participating in sports across Connecticut, but the recent objections have arisen largely because of one girl's success and the cascading effect on other athletes. The broader issue is an important one, but is it right – or necessary – to single out a teenager simply because they are winning?*

*Third, and this is critical – we are talking about teenagers here, not professional athletes. In weighing the privacy of the athlete against the public nature of the issue behind her story, we have tried to consider the potential impact on a young, vulnerable individual who is already making a statement about gender and identity that is not an easy one to make in high school. (When we covered the story of transgender runner Andraya Yearwood a year ago, it was with her participation and consent.)*

*Last, there are those who argue we are ignoring the fact that a transgender girl may have an “unfair” advantage. But what is fair or unfair in sports is, to a degree, subjective. Tall people have an advantage on the basketball court. Athletes whose parents can afford to send them to year-round training have a clear-cut advantage in soccer, tennis and other sports. Our notions of what is fair and unfair are often driven by our own frames of reference.*

*In discussing this issue, we were not unmindful of the way an athlete who has been working toward a goal might feel when dealing with this changing landscape. But it is also crucial to reflect on the nature of high school sports. Everybody wants to win and there’s nothing wrong with that. But there’s more to it; playing on a team is also about commitment, dedication, teamwork and inclusion. Many great — and lasting — friendships were forged on the playing field.*

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