

Lia Thomas and the 'Authentic Self'



by Bruce Bawer

If the *New York Times* poses as America's newspaper of record, presenting every day's news through the lens of woke ideology and the Democratic Party narrative, the *New Yorker* is our flagship "serious" weekly magazine. So when the *New Yorker* runs a sober 5700-word article about what is arguably, in the minds of our woke brethren, the major issue of the day – namely, trans athletes – it merits notice. The [text](#) in question, dated March 17, was written by sports journalist Louisa Thomas (hereafter "Louisa") and focused primarily on University of Pennsylvania swimmer Lia Thomas (hereafter "Lia"), who at a meet in Atlanta last Thursday became, as ESPN [reported](#), "the first known transgender athlete to win a Division I national championship in any sport."

Lia was born Will Thomas in 1998 or 1999 and, according to Louisa, "realized she was transgender in the summer of 2018." But you won't find the name Will Thomas in Louisa's article,

which begins as follows:

Lia Thomas has been swimming since she was five years old. As a high schooler, she was one of the top swimmers in Texas, an All-American. She followed her older brother onto the men's team at the University of Pennsylvania, and established herself as a strong competitor in distance races; in her sophomore season, at the Ivy League championships, she finished second in three events.

In fact, during all that time, Lia was Will. And Will was a "he." Lia is a "he," too, of course. But in the year 2022, under the rules set down by our woke overlords, we are expected to pretend that Will's decision four years ago to start calling himself Lia, and to identify as a "she," had the magical effect of retroactively rewriting his entire life, turning Will Thomas into a girl from the moment of his birth.

Although Louisa's article starts by introducing us to Lia, it isn't an athlete profile. Rather, it's an account of the controversy surrounding the question of whether male-to-female transgender athletes should be allowed to compete as women, and the shifting rules on the subject that have been laid down by the International Olympic Committee, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, U.S.A. Swimming, and other bodies. Louisa is emphatically on the side of inclusion – as she makes clear, any other position seems to her to be "transphobic" – and she knows that in order to win sympathy for a cause you need to focus on a single individual. So it is that she repeatedly returns to Lia, whose emotional travails we're invited to empathize with.

Of course, for every transsexual athlete who's allowed to participate in women's sports, there are hundreds if not thousands of biological females whose athletic careers are being affected by that decision. But Louisa doesn't invite us to empathize with *those* athletes, let alone with their parents

or supporters. On the contrary, the very title of Louisa's article, "The Trans Swimmer who Won Too Much," implies that the reason why female swimmers and their supporters have criticized Lea isn't that he's beating them unfairly but, quite simply, that he's beating them. As Louisa puts it: "Lia Thomas would have attracted little attention if she always lost."

In batting away at Lia's critics, Louisa also plays the conservative card. "There was something absurd," she writes, "in the spectacle of conservative politicians who have never shown any interest in supporting women's sports, which are chronically underfunded and underexposed, moralizing about the sanctity of collegiate women's swimming." No, what's "absurd" is the total redefinition of man and woman that began to be foisted upon us in the last five or ten years and that we're now expected to parrot without hesitation. True enough, many of the conservatives who have weighed in on the trans issue may not be particularly interested in women's sports – but that doesn't keep them from recognizing an outrage and an injustice when they see it. In these woke times, when the left has gone all in on the radical redefinition of sexual identity, it is, yes, pretty much only on the right that you can find people willing to assert traditional sex distinctions.

Mentioning a group called the Women's Sports Policy Working Group, which seeks a "middle way" on trans athletes, Louisa notes that "its most famous member" is Martina Navratilova. Here's the totality of what Louisa has to say about Martina: she's "angered many trans athletes and advocates with comments she has made in the past." So much for one of the world's great tennis players *and* early champions of gay rights. As it happens, the same gutsy devotion to the truth that decades ago made Navratilova a pioneering gay-rights activist led her, in a 2018 tweet, to state the plain facts about transgenderism and sports: "You can't just proclaim yourself a female and be

able to compete against women. There must be some standards, and having a penis and competing as a woman would not fit that standard.”

A few years ago, virtually everyone on earth would have agreed. But by 2018, such a sentiment made Martina “transphobic” in the eyes of the *bien pensant*. Facing an onslaught of criticism, she promised to explore the subject further. “Well, I’ve now done that,” she wrote in a February 2019 [article](#) for the *London Times*,

and, if anything, my views have strengthened. To put the argument at its most basic: a man can decide to be female, take hormones if required by whatever sporting organization is concerned, win everything in sight and perhaps earn a small fortune, and then reverse his decision and go back to making babies if he so desires. It’s insane and it’s cheating. I am happy to address a transgender woman in whatever form she prefers, but I would not be happy to compete against her. It would not be fair.

Straight talk from a gay icon (who, on Thursday, said that Lia’s Division I victory should be marked in the records book with “an asterisk” because the rules allowing his participation “are not correct”). Although Louisa doesn’t address Martina’s comments directly, it’s obvious that her own views are as far removed as possible from Martina’s. “The International Olympic Committee,” Louisa writes, “began allowing trans athletes to compete in 2004. At first, the I.O.C. required athletes to legally change their gender and undergo genital surgery, *as if a mislabelled passport and the presence of a penis gave them a leg up on the competition.*” (My emphasis.) For Louisa, apparently, nothing should be required of a trans athlete other than that athlete’s assertion that what appears to be a “he” is, and has always been, a “she.”

Since the only thing that matters in woke world anywhere near as much as transgenderism is race, Louisa drags that into her story, too. “Female athletes have bodies of different sizes, colors, shapes, and sexualities,” she writes. “Those bodies, especially those that differ from a feminine – *and, often, white* – ideal, have, for a long time, been castigated as too muscular, too masculine, too threatening.” (Again, my emphasis.) What does race have to do with it? When you talk about female bodies looking “too muscular, too masculine, too threatening,” the case that leaps to mind for me is that of the hulking East German woman swimmers who were suspected of doping at the 1976 (and other) Olympics. Those suspicions were later confirmed by Stasi records; but at the time the American swimmers who dared to speak up about a manifestly shady situation were demonized in the media – the U.S. media included – as sore losers and disruptors of international harmony.

Again bringing up race, Louisa writes, apropos of the I.O.C.’s changing rules on transgender women, that “a number of observers remained troubled by the idea of a traditionally white, patriarchal institution defining, and policing, the supposed boundaries of womanhood.” Again, what does whiteness have to do with it? As for “patriarchy” and “the supposed boundaries of womanhood,” one of the ironies of the new trans dispensation is that this purported new frontier in women’s rights is, in fact, the most audacious patriarchal move ever, enabling middling male athletes to destroy the careers of the very best female athletes – while getting applauded by the PC crowd not just for their athletic prowess but for their personal courage.

What about Louisa’s point that female athletes have “bodies of different sizes,” etc.? Sure. But they’re all *female bodies*. Whatever Lia may assert about her “inner identity,” her “authentic self,” her body remains that of a man. And swimming meets are not contests between “authentic selves” –

they're contests between bodies. This is a point that Louisa, like most of those who argue for trans inclusion in sports, is at pains to avoid. The photograph accompanying her article shows Lia in the water – but it's a pretty innocuous image that fails to capture Lia's looming size and broad, manly build. A more honest article would have included a photo showing Lia alongside his smaller female teammates. But then such a photo would have made it obvious from the git-go just how much of a joke Louisa's argument is.

At one point Louisa reports on a discussion she had with lawyer Nancy Hogshead-Makar, who founded the above-mentioned Women's Sports Policy Working Group. It's a curious exchange. In response to Hogshead-Makar's matter-of-fact observation that the sole justification for sex segregation in sports is biology, Louisa maintains that "the biology of sex differences between athletes [is] murky." Murky? What's murky about the differences between male and female? Are they murkier than the question of whether a person with a male body should be believed when he says he's really a woman? Louisa adds that "the legacy effects of testosterone-driven puberty [are] not totally established or understood." By "testosterone-driven puberty," of course, she means "male puberty." Exactly what about male puberty is a mystery? What balderdash.

Louisa proceeds to tsk-tsk at Hogshead-Makar because the latter, she complains, "insists on referring to 'biological' genders" – an inappropriate practice, apparently, that puts her "deeply at odds with those in favor of broader trans inclusion." Well, yes, if you're trying to make a case for trans inclusion in sports, the straightforward facts of biology do tend to get in the way. But to take biology off the table when you're talking about sports is ridiculous, because – again – sports is a matter of pitting body against body, not "authentic self" against "authentic self." It's fascinating how woke folk who parrot the mantra "follow the science" when they think it bolsters their own case in other matters have

tried to rule the very mention of the science of biology out of line when it comes to the trans issue.

Louisa isn't the only female sportswriter to have weighed in on Lia's Division I victory. At the *Washington Post*, Sally Jenkins took the angle that "everyone is trans" – yes, you read that right – because we're all

on the way to becoming someone profoundly different than we were, and keeping score is just a way to track the arc of a person from youth to prime to past it. If you subtract the aim of becomingness from competition just because you're afraid of a Lia Thomas and make it strictly about the chance to win a prize, then you might as well go to an amusement park and shoot a squirt gun at a clown face because it will have about as much meaning.

Jenkins urges us to look past the science – whatever it may be – and recognize that "the real aim and value of NCAA competition" isn't to "vault... small subset of young talents on to a podium" but "to grow people," to help them "explor[e] who [they] are." Which, Jenkins says, means that the *real* question is, or should be, this: "Is Thomas's presence preventing other swimmers from finding out who they are?" I'd have to say no: on the contrary, Lia's presence is shaping their fate. After having spent much of their lives striving, with immense discipline and determination, to improve as swimmers in hopes that they might one day end up on that podium that Jenkins dismisses so blithely, these biological females have turned out to be losers in a game whose rules have been rewritten overnight so as to deny them a fair competition and bestow undeserved laurels on the likes of Lea Thomas – all so that privileged people like Sally Jenkins and Louisa Thomas, who will never be obliged to give up their own dreams for such a reason, can bask in their own superior virtue.

But back to Louisa. Toward the end of her article, she serves

up some of the usual rot: reading arguments for excluding trans athletes from women's sports, she says, you might think "that trans women are a conquering horde, swarming the leaderboards," when in fact "trans women are grossly underrepresented at high levels of all sports." Nonsense: they're only "grossly underrepresented" if you accept as legitimate the grotesquely high numbers of young people who, in the last few years, obviously in response to a calamitous generation trend, have begun identifying as trans. Naturally, Louisa also plays the suicide card: "Transgender youth are more likely to be homeless and live in poverty. They are more likely to experience violence, bullying, rejection, depression, and suicidal ideation." None of which amounts to an argument for anything. In addition, Louisa quotes an academic who accuses opponents of trans inclusion in sports of "trying to erase trans kids from existence." On the contrary, the campaign to let men who identify as women compete against biological women will, if taken to its natural conclusion, effectively erase biologically female athletes.

Louisa concludes her piece with a truly cockamamie flourish: "It may be that [Lia] Thomas retains a significant metabolic and physiological advantage over cisgender women. It may be that she is an outlier. It may also be that she is swimming faster relative to her competitors than before in part because she is in a better place now – no longer battling gender dysphoria, able to swim, as she put it, as her authentic self, comfortable pulling on a swimsuit and feeling her body for what it is, slipping through the water." Read that last part again: "*feeling her body for what it is.*" And what exactly is Lia's body? It's a male body, the product of a process of male puberty, each cell of it containing an XY chromosome. It's exactly the same body that it was before Lia purportedly found her "authentic self." And while her discovery of that "authentic self" – assuming it really happened at all – may have transformed Lia psychologically, it didn't effect the slightest change in that tall, strong male body that keeps

“slipping through the water” past one shorter, weaker female body after another, winning women’s awards and breaking women’s records.

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