

Sports Should Unify, Not Divide Us

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Clay Travis

Imprimis (im-pri-mis), [Latin]: in the first place

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The following is adapted from a talk delivered on April 17, 2024, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in Bellevue, Washington.

On April 6 this year, as the University of South Carolina and University of Iowa women’s basketball teams were preparing to play in the NCAA National Championship game, two press conferences were held featuring the two head coaches: South Carolina’s Dawn Staley and Iowa’s Lisa Bluder.

An OutKick reporter asked Coach Staley a question regarding an issue that needs to be answered honestly and realistically if women’s sports is going to survive—he asked if she supported the idea that biological men can legitimately compete in women’s athletics. And Staley failed the test.

To be fair, it was clear from Staley’s reaction that she didn’t appreciate the question and would rather not have answered it. “Damn, you got deep on me,” she said. But after some uncomfortable hesitation, she came around to admitting that she was “under the opinion [that] if you’re a woman, you should play. If you consider yourself a woman and you want to play sports or vice versa, you should be able to play.” Asked again to clarify whether she thought transgender women should be able to play women’s sports, she said simply, “Yes.”

It is rare that a women’s college coach is asked to address this issue, because the people in sports media tend to be woke and would rather let transgender ideology impose itself on sports without becoming a public controversy. It is not surprising, then, that the sports media’s reaction to this exchange was not to press Staley about the implications of her statement but to condemn OutKick’s reporter for having the audacity to put Staley on the spot.

There was good reason to press Staley. She has made a point of saying, after all, that one reason her women's team is so good is because it practices against an intramural men's team that is better. Indeed, she has thanked the men's team for helping her women win a national championship. She is fully aware, then, that men are bigger, stronger, and faster than women. So why would she say, on her sport's biggest stage and at the apex of her career, that men should be able to play women's basketball?

Staley of course is by no means alone in this. To one degree or another, almost the entire sports world has surrendered to woke madness. Consider the story of collegiate women's swimming standout Riley Gaines. Now on the staff of OutKick, she has been one of the few to speak out. Gaines was a swimmer at the University of Kentucky and a Southeastern Conference champion. But when she went to the NCAA Championships, she was placed in the position of swimming against a man going by the name of Lia Thomas. For three years, Thomas had competed unremarkably as a member of the University of Pennsylvania men's swimming team. He then "identified" as a woman, was allowed to swim for the University of Pennsylvania women's team, and became a women's national champion. As a result, ESPN absurdly honored him during its Women's History Month special as one of the top female athletes of the year.

How did we get to this point?

I was trained to be a lawyer, but I founded OutKick because I love sports. One of the main reasons I love it is that it celebrates and rewards achievement, not failure. Sports is the ultimate meritocracy. The best man or woman or team wins—at least until recently.

My first book, *Dixieland Delight*, chronicled my experiences as a fan watching college football games in all twelve SEC stadiums. And one of its themes was how sports brought people together, whether they were white, black, Asian, or Hispanic, male or female, Democrat or Republican. When the home team made a big play or won the game, the fans would celebrate as one without giving a thought to race, gender, or politics. The power of sports to unify a stadium full of diverse individuals was awesome.

Relatedly, when I first started hosting sports talk radio programs, nobody ever called into my show and began a comment by identifying himself as black or white or gay or straight or transgender. More recently, with the rise of identity politics, callers increasingly make a point of mentioning their race or gender before giving their opinion. What is the sense of that?

Here is a story that helps to illustrate my point and suggests a solution.

The most-watched basketball game in U.S. history was game six of the 1998 NBA Finals. Almost 36 million viewers tuned in to watch the Chicago Bulls play the Utah Jazz. And in 1998, there were 70 or 80 million fewer people in America than there are today—in terms of the percentage of population, 36 million then would be roughly the equivalent of 44 million today. That of course was the era of Michael Jordan. In fact, game six ended that year with Jordan hitting a game-winning jumper and collecting his sixth championship in eight years.

Twenty-six years later, Jordan remains the most beloved and respected basketball player in history. As an indicator of his continuing popularity, consider the astonishing fact that Nike still sells more Air Jordans each year than the shoes of every current NBA player combined. Do Jordan's politics have anything to do with this? No, quite the opposite. The Jordan brand has broad and lasting appeal because it represents excellence and meritocracy. Jordan was once asked, in fact, why he wasn't more outspoken about politics. His reply? "Republicans buy sneakers too."

So in 1998, the NBA was enjoying record ratings and there was talk of it challenging the primacy of the NFL. Fast forward to the 2020 NBA Finals, in which LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers defeated the Miami Heat in another game six to win the championship. Far from setting records in terms of viewership, it was the least-watched NBA Finals game in generations, with only 7.4 million viewers tuning in. In other words, the NBA lost 80 percent of its audience during a time when the population of the U.S. grew by 30 percent.

This has nothing to do with the game of basketball itself, as seen in the fact that college basketball has been hitting record highs in terms of popularity. So what explains it? It's simple: the NBA embraced woke ideology.

In 2020, the league painted the slogan "Black Lives Matter" on its basketball courts. It also postponed a playoff game because a black man named Jacob Blake, a serial domestic abuser armed with a knife, was shot by police. The police had been summoned to the scene by a black woman who called 911 because she was terrified of Blake. Despite this occurring in the wake of the #MeToo movement, WNBA players also joined the protest, writing Blake's name on their jerseys. Then players in both leagues began replacing the names on their jerseys with left-wing political slogans. Over a relatively short period of time, professional basketball identified itself with the belief that America is "systemically racist," rotten to the core.

Meanwhile, when it was not busy denigrating America, the NBA was cozying up to communist China, America's chief strategic enemy in the world. It is forbidden in the NBA to say a negative word about communist China—a full-fledged tyranny ruled by the all-powerful Chinese Communist Party—because the NBA is working tirelessly to expand its audience and increase its profits in that country.

Then there's the NBA's support for the radical transgender movement in the U.S. The league pulled its 2017 All-Star Game out of Charlotte, North Carolina, because the state legislature had passed a bill to protect women by keeping men out of their bathrooms—meanwhile, it held NBA games in Middle Eastern countries where the mere fact of being gay is a crime punishable by death.

In response to this anti-American wokeness, an overwhelming number of Americans have tuned out professional basketball. In an expanding market, the NBA's audience has cratered—but have you heard that story reported? No. Most Americans are unaware of

the NBA's historic ratings collapse because the sports media in our country is even more woke than the mainstream political media—and that's not an easy accomplishment!

Sometimes it seems difficult to remain hopeful about the future of American sports—but I do remain hopeful. The people in sports who embrace woke ideology are turning their backs on truth and on the sports ideals of excellence and meritocracy. But truth and those ideals remain at the heart of America and of American sports.

Courage is also so important in turning things around. The great majority of sports fans understand that men should compete against men and women should compete against women. There is a huge market for the truth in a culture in which so many people are peddling falsehoods.

Earlier I mentioned Riley Gaines, who was on course to graduate from the University of Kentucky and pursue a career as a dentist. But all that changed the day she was forced to swim against a man for the national championship. She was angered at this not only for herself and her fellow female competitors, but on behalf of the principles of truth and fairness. And today she is leading the fight—in the face of fierce institutional opposition, including horrendous personal attacks and threats of violence—to defend the reality-based idea that women's sports are for women, not men.

That's what I mean by courage. And if we are going to prevail in this battle to restore sanity in the world of sports, we need a lot more of it.

I am often asked what impact an individual can have when there are so many large and wealthy organizations and companies—the NBA is only one among many—on the other side. These days I like to remind the people asking me this of what happened when Bud Light hired a man who claims to be a woman to sell its beer. In response, many consumers quit drinking Bud Light and switched to different brands. In the year following the launch of that woke marketing campaign, Bud Light consumption dropped by 30 percent. It is the most successful individual consumer boycott we've seen so far, most of it driven by men who were fed up with woke ideology and decided to stand against it.

Think about this controversy over women's sports from a man's point of view. In general, men aspire to be bigger, stronger, and faster than they naturally are. That's a big reason why gifted athletes are so popular with men. By definition, this is never going to include women who are pretending to be men. I don't say this to be mean—it's simply a fact that women pretending to be men aren't going to make it in men's sports leagues. No woman will ever become an NFL quarterback or a major league pitcher or an NBA point guard. Men won't allow someone who's not a man to define what masculinity is.

On the other side of the coin, perhaps some women are being taken advantage of by men who are pretending to be women—and by their woke cheerleaders in the media and elsewhere—because of women's sympathetic and nurturing qualities. Earlier I mentioned

the male swimmer who ESPN celebrated as a top female athlete. Men would never allow the opposite to happen, and women need to be similarly tough and speak the truth.

Women fought for a long time to get equal numbers of athletic scholarships so their daughters could compete on the same level as boys. It's a shame to see those hard-won gains being sacrificed on the altar of the reigning left-wing orthodoxy—which is more accurately described as a kind of mental illness rooted in a denial of reality. Men, and especially fathers, must continue speaking out in defense of women's sports. But a big part of the solution must be women who summon the courage to defend the truth about what it means to be a woman and to refuse to capitulate to the idea of men taking over women's spaces.

The woke Left spends a lot of time talking about so-called white male privilege—but is anything more unjust than men claiming the right to compete in women's sports and demanding that the rest of us endorse their claim as legitimate? This radical denial of scientific reality completely undercuts the ideals of excellence and meritocracy that have animated sports competition throughout history. Women like Dawn Staley know the truth. They need to stop kowtowing to radical left orthodoxy and courageously speak the truth.

I believe that one day soon in America—even in sports media!—we will free ourselves from woke ideology and return to recognizing reality and speaking honestly. Only when that happens will sports return to serving as an important source of unity rather than division in American culture.