

My name is Emily Kaht. Sports have been a big part of my life since I was a little girl. I started off with tumbling and gymnastics, which I did for about seven years. In high school I transitioned to track and field, where I specialized in the pole vault. My senior year I added cross country into the mix. That laid the foundation for a love of long-distance running that has stayed with me even as an adult. These days I run half marathons and full marathons.

In all the sports I've tried over the years, one of the constants has been the obvious differences between the male and female athletes. It's just a fact of life that the guys are faster, stronger, and more powerful. When I was in tumbling, one of the guys could jump so high on the trampoline that he could grab onto the ceiling. None of the girls could do that. In pole vault, the guys cleared much higher bars than the girls. Sometimes in practice, when the coach wasn't watching, guys who were friends with the male pole vaulters would come over and do a few vaults just for fun. These guys, who didn't even know what they were doing, would break the girls' school record just messing around. What took the girls years of experience and technique to accomplish, these guys could do with sheer muscle almost immediately.

I think my experience highlights one of the issues with letting boys compete in girls' sports that isn't talked about a lot. Most of the attention goes to the superstars, the girls who would have been at the top of the podium if not for the boys intruding. And that's fair. But it's also not the whole story. These kinds of policies would impact athletes like me, too, and that's not okay either.

I was not a phenom. I'm never going to be an Olympian. And that's okay. But I worked hard and put the time in, and I still had a fulfilling career, able to accomplish the more modest goals I set for myself. I made the varsity team when I went out for cross country. I broke my high school's all-time record for girls' pole vault. I won several small invitational meets, and I placed well at some bigger ones, like taking the silver at County one year. My senior year, I finally made it to the state track and field championships. I was never going to win there; just getting to go was all I dreamed of.

But the thing is, throwing even one boy into the mix could have ruined it all. For cross country, the top seven girls make varsity. I was number seven. If there had been even one boy competing with the girls, I almost certainly would have been bumped out.

If any one of the boys messing around at pole vault had started competing as a girl, I never would have broken the school record. And that's not even getting into the boys who actually knew how to vault.

A boy competing for any of the schools in my area would have knocked me out of my place at the invitational meets. A boy competing for my own school would have meant that for some meets, I wouldn't get to compete at all. For invitational meets, each school only gets to send the top two athletes in each event. Adding just one boy to the team would have meant that a girl would have to stay home. This is hugely damaging to girls' sports even if the boy doesn't go on to win every meet he enters.

While it's easy to see what would have happened to my high school career if boys had been allowed to compete as girls, I also have direct experience competing against men. In college, I joined my university's Quidditch team. Quidditch is a co-ed tackle sport in which players run around holding "broomsticks" and try to throw a volleyball through hoops. One goalie-like player guards each team's hoops, and other players run around with kickball balls, which they can throw at the opposing team's scorers to temporarily remove them from play.

I quickly realized that there was no good place for me in Quidditch. It made no sense for me to be the “goalie” because male players towered over me and could easily throw the ball over my head into one of the hoops. My hands were too small to get an effective grip on the kickballs. But most of all, it wasn’t smart for me to be a scoring player. That was downright dangerous, because those are the players that tackle each other. In one game, a guy slammed into me and sent me flying, giving me the biggest bruise I have ever had in my life: a huge purple/yellow contusion that spanned more than half of my lower leg. In another game, a guy rushed me, and the back of my head smacked into the ground with such force that my vision grayed out. When I came to, the referee had halted the game. I was led to the medical tent, where I was diagnosed with a concussion. The medical official kept giving me three words to remember, and I kept being unable to repeat them back when she asked me about them a minute later.

My primary takeaway from Quidditch was that the single biggest improvement that could be made to the sport was to separate the men and women. This was years before World Rugby announced that research had found that there was a *minimum* 20% to 30% greater risk of injury for typical female athletes when tackled by typical male athletes, and that that risk could be in the range of 40% to 60% depending on the sizes of the players. I’m not surprised by the World Rugby data, but in retrospect, I feel silly that it took the personal experience of getting a concussion for me to realize how unsafe it was for me to join a co-ed tackle sport. If I’d known then what I know now, I wouldn’t have competed in Quidditch tournaments. It’s not worth the risk, and I’m lucky I wasn’t more seriously injured.

Again, I am not a top-level athlete. But all of my experiences show the damage to fairness and safety that comes with allowing boys to compete against girls, much of it invisible to media headlines.

The Associated Press recently published an article to this effect. They claim that trans people compete all the time and successfully fly under the radar. As an example, they wrote about a male track athlete, who, in high school, “won several events in small and mid-size meets” and took sixth and tenth place in the state championships. They present it as an example of it being okay for boys to compete as girls, because this boy didn’t totally dominate the state championships, and there were no media headlines about it. To me, this example proves the opposite point: that this problem is far more widespread than we know. An athlete like that is precisely the kind that would have quietly destroyed my high school sports career, all without so much as a peep from the media. I ask you to keep this in mind if any opponents of this bill try to claim that a lack of famous examples in Ohio means there isn’t a problem here.

This is not okay at any level of sport. Youth sports had a huge impact on me – shaping my personality into what it is today, helping me accept my body, and giving me the tools to have an active lifestyle as an adult, just for starters. I want future girls to have the same opportunities.

I was aghast when I read about the situation in Connecticut. Two male runners there have been taking both the first *and* second-place spots at the state championships, as well as setting new “girls” records that are being accepted with a straight face.

Reading about that compelled me to take action. I feel so strongly about this that the last two full marathons I ran, I carried a large “Save Women’s Sports” flag that bore the definition of the word “woman” – “adult human female.” The last marathon was during the pandemic. Races were cancelled, so I ran back and forth in front of the NCAA headquarters until I’d run the full 26.2 miles, wearing a mask the whole time.

Statistics show that the majority of the general public does not support allowing men to compete in women's sports. This matches with my experience with the flag. Out of all the people who saw me racing or training with it, no one ever voiced disagreement. On the contrary, countless strangers expressed support and thanked me for doing it.

Women's sports cannot be fair if men are allowed to compete in them. And it doesn't just affect the female champions, which would be bad enough; it affects girls who just want to qualify for the team, or participate in the big meet. It's time for everyone to stand up for what's right and do their part to ensure that girls can not only participate, but can also enjoy success in their own sports. I've done what I can to raise awareness, but you have the power to do so much more. I beg you to use that power to save women's sports. Thank you.