

## **A coach of two transgender athletes says Utah’s HB11 will ‘shut them out from their entire identity’**

‘It’s not the death of women’s sport for me,’ the coach says. ‘It’s the death of my athlete being able to identify with who they are as athletes and swimmers.’



(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Protesters on the steps of the Capitol, in support of transgender you

By Julie Jag and Alex Vejar

March 29, 2022, 6:00 a.m.

<https://www.sltrib.com/sports/2022/03/29/coach-two-transgender/>

She’d already been told once she didn’t belong.

A few meets into her first season on her high school girls swim team, the teen received notice from the Utah High School Activities Association that she had to stop competing immediately. As a transgender girl, she had been undergoing hormone treatment for nine months, three months shy of the UHSAA requirement for a transitioning person who wants to compete in girls sports.

“It was really devastating because she basically was told she had to use the boys locker room and compete as a man or not swim at all,” the girl’s coach said. “So that was tough.”

At least she can compete next year, the coach thought.

But on Friday, Utah legislators changed that.

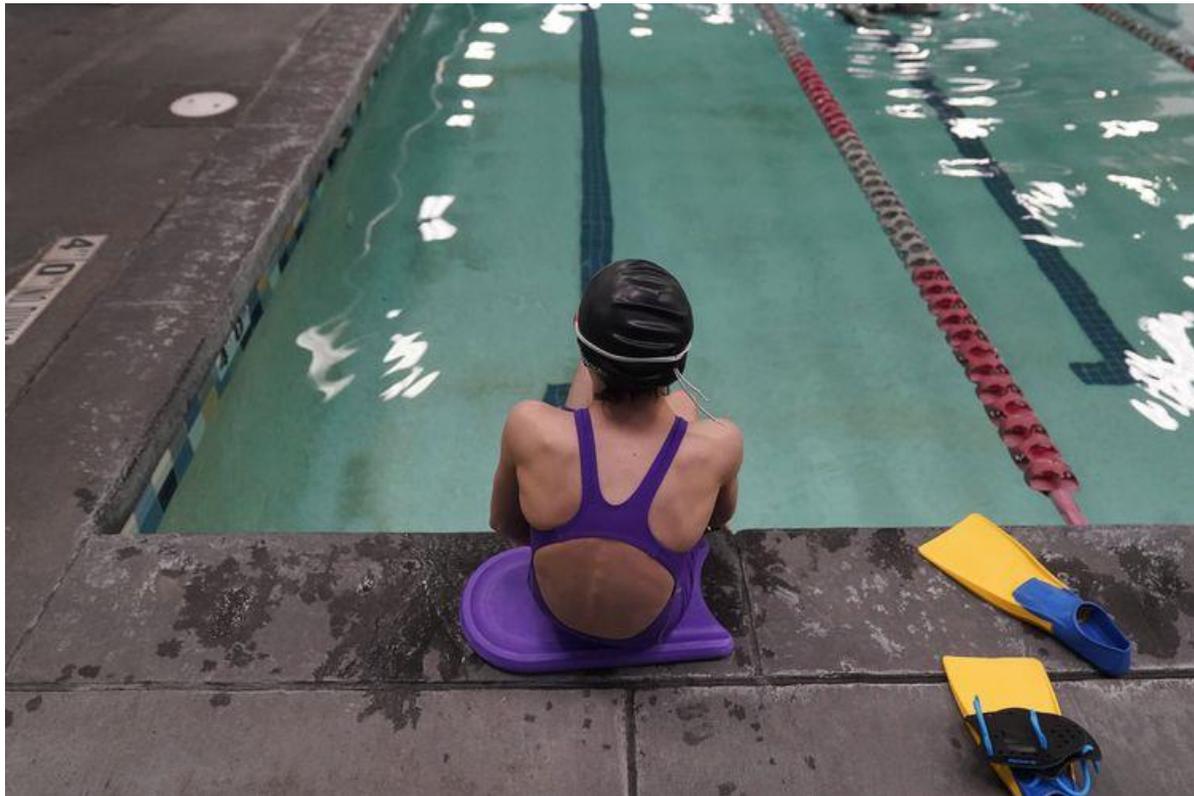
In a special session, they overturned Gov. Spencer Cox's veto of [House Bill 11](#) with a two-thirds majority, effectively banning transgender girls from playing school sports.

"I truly believe we're here to uphold Title IX, to preserve the integrity of women's sports," said the bill's sponsor, Rep. Kera Birkeland, R-Morgan, "and to do so in a way unlike other states."

The swim coach has two transgender girls on the club and high school teams she coaches. The Tribune is not naming the coach or the athletes to protect their identities. The coach said she realizes her situation is extremely rare. Only four of the 75,000 athletes participating in sports in Utah have registered with the UHSAA as transgender, and only one is female. But that gives the coach a unique perspective on the impact of the new law.

"It's not the death of women's sport for me," she said. "It's the death of my athletes being able to identify with who they are as athletes and swimmers."

The bill bans any public school student transitioning from male to female from participating in girls sports. Those transitioning from female to male will still be able to participate. [Previously, transgender athletes could compete if they complied with UHSAA guidelines.](#) Those guidelines, implemented three years ago, require males transitioning to female to undergo hormone replacement therapy for 12 months and register with the UHSAA, a private entity that oversees school athletics within the state.



(Rick Bowmer | AP) A 12-year-old transgender swimmer seen at a pool in Utah on Monday, Feb. 22, 2021.

Unless it prompts a lawsuit, which the ACLU said on Friday is “necessary and inevitable,” the ban will go into effect July 1. While the ban is litigated, transgender girls wishing to compete in girls sports will be required to get approval from a commission of experts appointed by the governor, the house speaker and the senate president. The commission will make decisions on a case-by-case basis while evaluating things like wingspan, weight and height.

“This legislative ban is hurtful to kids and targeted at a problem that people are dreaming up,” said Chris Rose, whose daughter is a senior and plays multiple sports at Clearfield High. “We should be teaching compassion and gaining better understanding of LGBTQ kids. These state legislators are completely missing the mark and guiding our state down a hateful path.”

Birkeland, a basketball referee, said in a statement Tuesday that the bill represents the will of female athletes across Utah.

“High school girls across the state have expressed their concerns, and we owe it to them to listen,” she said. “Sports are their opportunity to overcome obstacles and break barriers. But in order to do that, they need a fair playing field.”

But Logan High senior Aryion Covington said she has no problem competing against a trans athlete. A senior who will play soccer at Blue Mountain Community College in Oregon next year, Covington said every athlete has strengths and weaknesses.

“I could get frustrated because they’re doing better than I am, but that happens in any other game,” she said. “So I feel like I would just try to do my best to work harder.”

Of greater concern to her, she said, is the ripple effect the bill will have not only on transgender kids, but others who identify as LGBTQ+. Just the introduction of the bill noticeably raised anxiety in many of the members of the Gay Straight Alliance club at her school, she said.

“It’s kind of like an eye-opener for some of them to feel almost like they can’t be truly and fully who they are because of these laws and bills that are passed,” said Covington.

She added, “It definitely is hard to see people go through that type of heartache because other people won’t allow them to be who they are.”

Covington said her view contrasts with that of the rest of her family. She also said there hasn’t been much chatter about the bill around her school.

Tim Davis, girls’ tennis coach at Maeser Prep, said he just wants to find a way for every athlete to be included.

“I honestly don’t know the right answers, but I believe everybody deserves an opportunity,” Davis said. “What this bill’s impact will have directly, I’m not sure. But I hope the impact it has is that it begins a conversation that will find lasting and positive solutions where coaches, administrators and our young people become committed to inclusion and finding solutions.”

An open letter to legislators sent by Salt Lake County District Attorney Sim Gill on Friday noted that sports participation “is a predictor of positive educational and occupational outcomes and lower levels of social isolation. In short, providing more opportunities for extracurricular

activities decreases criminal behavior and victimization. However, isolating children from these activities increases their risk now and later in life.”

In Cox’s explanation for his veto of HB11 issued Tuesday, he said 86% of transgender youth report contemplating suicide and 56% of transgender youth have attempted it

The Utah swim coach also is concerned with how the transgender athletes she coaches will fill the voids swimming now occupies. She said the other swimmers on the team rallied around the trans girl when she was told she could no longer compete on the girls team this season. But if she’s not on the team, interacting with those kids every day, much of that support will likely fade away.

She’s even more concerned about her age group swimmer, whose life revolves around the sport and the friends she’s made within it.

“She just has this core group of friends that are swimmers and they just are comfortable and they’re safe in practice. And I worry,” she said. “I worry that they’d be upset that they wouldn’t be able to find an outlet like that. But I also worry that the outlet that find might not be as safe and comfortable as the environment that we’re able to provide.

“If they found their tribe,” she added, “I don’t know why we’re wanting to take that away from children.”

In his pre-vote comments Friday, Mike Schultz, R-Hooper, said the bill is a preemptive move aimed at protecting girls from athletes who transition and then dominate their sport. Though he did not mention her by name, his case in point was Lia Thomas, the Pennsylvania swimmer who in her first year competing as a woman set NCAA season-best times in the 200- and 500-yard freestyle. At the NCAA championships last week, Thomas, who began hormone therapy nearly three years ago, won the 500 to become the first transgender woman to win a national swimming title. She also tied for fifth in the 200 and took eighth in the 100.

“Do we want to wait until something like the Penn State swimmer situation happens in Utah?” Schultz asked.

Both the swim coach and Covington said that seems like an unlikely scenario. Even before the ban, the obstacles of a male competing in a female sport included the year of hormone treatments as well as all the bullying and social stigma that often comes with transitioning. In addition, athletes must provide the UHSAA a list of any medications they’re taking and they are not allowed to switch back to their original gender once they are cleared to participate as transgender.

The payout also isn’t substantial. Female athletes receive 42% of college athletic scholarship dollars, or \$133 million less in scholarships than men, each year, according to [athleticscholarships.net](http://athleticscholarships.net). And pro female athletes, with the exception of tennis players and a few anomalies, tend to earn pennies on the dollar compared to their male counterparts.

And to touch on any of that, a kid still has to be extremely talented. The swim coach said she can attest that isn’t something that is embedded in the Y chromosome.

The risk of closing doors to transgender kids is much greater, she said.

“It’s hard because it’s been 10 years that I’ve been a coach now, and I’ve seen thousands of athletes in my time,” she said. “And these are the only two that are going to be affected by this rule. But that’s basically going to shut them out from their entire identity. And they totally identify as swimmers.”

They are just, the swim coach said, trying to find a place where they belong.

**Editor’s note** • *This story is available to Salt Lake Tribune subscribers only. Thank you for supporting local journalism.*