



## Hopeful Future for Trans Athletes

Canadian cyclist shares her struggle to be recognized as a woman

By Elizabeth Chuck

Kristen Worley, a 2008 Olympic hopeful in cycling, has a secret.

But now, with great anxiety, she's divulging it.

A few years ago, the Canadian had sex-change surgery to change her gender from male to female. With the help of a steady regimen of estrogen, Worley looks female, sounds female and, to anybody who didn't know her before, is female.

Worley has told her story to sports organizations across Canada in her quest to get permission to compete in the Olympics, but she spoke for the first time publicly in an interview with MSNBC.com.

"I shouldn't be worrying about what people are going to do when they find out, but I'm so afraid," she said. "I'm just like any other girl there."

### Major milestone for Olympics

If Worley competes in the Beijing Games in 2008, it will be a milestone in Olympics history. There have been rumors of transsexual athletes participating in the Games, but none has ever come forward.

The International Olympics Committee officially changed its rules for transsexual people in 2004. To compete, an athlete must wait for two years after sex-reassignment surgery.

People who have had the surgery differ on how they want to be known. Worley refers to herself as a transitioned athlete, while others call themselves transsexuals.

Although the new Olympics rule hasn't been put to the test yet, the transsexual community says it has already benefited from it.

"It set a precedent for other organizations," said Helen Carroll, sports project coordinator for the San Francisco-based National Center for Lesbian Rights. "The U.S. Track and Field Organization has adopted rules very similar to the IOC ruling. Australia and Europe changed their professional women's golf rules so that Mianne Bagger could compete."

#### First male-to-female golfer

Bagger, 39, is the first male-to-female golfer to play professionally. The Danish woman was barred from the professional circuit when she had sex-reassignment surgery in 1995, but finally won admission in late 2004.

"It was lucky for me that the announcement from the IOC came out at a time when golf tours were reviewing their rules following my request to play in them," Bagger said in an interview with MSNBC.com.

Olympics historian David Wallechinsky cited only a few widely known cases in which gender has been an issue. Hermann Ratchet, who competed as a woman named Dora in the 1936 Games, finished fourth in the high jump. Two years later, Ratchet was barred from competition when it was learned that he was born with male and female reproductive organs.

More recently, Brazilian Edinanci Silva competed in the women's Olympic judo competition in 1996, finishing seventh. She caused controversy when she revealed that upon reaching puberty, she also had both male and female sex organs. But Silva had her male reproductive organs removed three years prior to competing, and ultimately was allowed to continue in women's judo.

Bagger and Worley aren't entirely happy with the new IOC rule. Instead of helping them to fit in with other athletes, the policy forces them to stand out, they say.

"They've marginalized a group of people that are already marginalized in society," Worley said. "They are forcing transitioned athletes to come out publicly to compete."

#### 'Rather just blend in'

Bagger says instead of getting attention for her golf scores, she is more often interviewed because of her sex change.

) "It's been difficult because in the media, people generally have been exposed to the extremes: drag queens or an overt characterization of something. We all get lumped into one group," she said. "People in general don't get to see people with this condition. It's really only the ones who attract attention, but why would anyone want to subject themselves to that? You would rather just blend in with society."

Bagger says she wants her main message to be: "I'm a good golfer — you've got to play bloody good to beat me."

Worley, still fearful about revealing her past, was reluctant to give her age, where she grew up and other details of her life.

She described herself growing up as a kid who had "all the opportunities in the world" but who always felt uncomfortable as a male.

"In my late teens, I said to myself, 'I have to deal with this. I'm in trouble.' There was a point in my life where death seemed like a more positive place," Worley said.

) In addition to undergoing surgery and waiting two years, the IOC policy requires an athlete to be legally recognized in his or her new gender.

Worley has been validated as a female athlete by the Europe-based Union Cycliste Internationale — the international body of cycling — and the Canadian Cycling Association, and has obtained her international cycling license.

Brett Stewart, director of domestic programs and development for the Canadian Cycling Association, said his organization looked at Worley's medical and legal documentation and compared it to the International Olympics Committee's requirements.

"Based on that, it was our determination that she be granted status as a female athlete and we were able to give her domestic freedom to compete in cycling," Stewart said. "With the process that is in place, she is considered to have female status."

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Because she was only recently recognized to compete as a woman, Worley is not a ranked cyclist yet. But in her own estimation, she has "a very good chance" of qualifying for the 2008 Games.

#### No actual advantage?

Perhaps the biggest hurdle facing the athletes is convincing critics that male-to-female transsexuals do not have a physical advantage over their competitors.

"It's the age-old phenomenon of people fearing what they don't know," said Jill Pilgrim, general counsel and director of business affairs for USA Track and Field Inc., who teamed up with a physician to do research on transsexual athletes. "When a male-to-female transsexual undergoes hormone therapy, they are reducing their testosterone levels and taking female hormones. They lose muscle mass, which is the advantage testosterone gives you."

Pilgrim said she believes the only sport in which men-to-women transsexuals might have an advantage is swimming, because these athletes gain body fat, which assists buoyancy.

"We haven't seen a huge record of Renee Richards taking off with everything [in tennis] and Mianne Bagger winning all the golf circuits," Carroll said.

Renee Richards, formerly Richard Raskind, sued the United States Tennis Association in 1976 for barring her from the U.S. Open. Richards later won the case, making her the first transsexual tennis player to compete.

Pilgrim said transsexuals who compete as men face a more problematic situation because they take testosterone, which is illegal under normal Olympic rules. These athletes can expect to be closely monitored to assure they are taking the appropriate amount of testosterone for their height and weight, Pilgrim said.

#### Slow acceptance

Carroll compared the struggle facing transsexual athletes to the gay and lesbian movement 20 years ago.

) "People don't understand who a transgendered person is at all. It's not about their sexual orientation," she said. "It's about how they feel pertaining to gender. That's a hard thing to wrap your head around."

Worley said she's waiting for a backlash among fellow cyclists after going public with her sex change.

But she added: "This could not be a more important issue — for sport and for society."

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