

Transgender Cyclist – The Story of Jillian Bearden

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I first started riding a bike at a young age of 3, and my love for riding bikes was born while living in Monument. All of my friends were spread out, so to see one another we had to ride everywhere—having a sweet bike was a big thing! I started really hitting the trails when I was about 23 years old. At 28 years I raced my first Criterium, and I was hooked! From the outside looking in everything was great in my life, but all along I was battling many inner demons that had control over my thoughts and feelings. I felt trapped, but I found that I could use my bike as a safe place and a place to release the stress that was building up inside of me.

Jillian Bearden was born Jonathan Bearden. Jillian is a transgender athlete who races bikes. At 36 years of age, she has made many contributions to the cycling and community in general in Colorado Springs, and is now helping to pave the way for transgender cyclists nationwide.



Jillian racing a crit in 2016

We cannot ignore the presence of transgender athletes, and many sport governing bodies are seeking ways to work with athletes that do change genders. The NCAA and the International Olympic Committee have drafted policies, and National Governing Bodies realized that it is also time to address this issue. The name of the game is fair competition, and this is even more important in the elite ranks.

While this is a story that will keep evolving over the next several years, let's take a look into where things stand.

Female to Male. There tends to be less concern with the female to male transition in terms of fairness of competition.

The rules as stated by the IOC:

"Those who transition from female to male are eligible to compete in the male category without restriction."

But they would still need to comply with WADA, and any other organization as far as hormone levels is concerned. *"Nothing in these guidelines is intended to undermine in any way the requirement to comply with the World Anti-Doping Code and the WADA International Standards."*

Female to male transgender athletes wishing to compete in sanctioned events need to file a **Therapeutic Use Exemption (TUE)** with the appropriate agency (USADA and/or WADA.) The athlete needs to show that their testosterone levels are within normal physiological values.

Currently the most prominent male transgender athlete is Chris Mosier. You might have seen him in a Nike commercial or the **EPSN body issue**. He has recently competed on the USA Triathlon National Team Duathlon Worlds. He is also helping provide information for athletes regarding transgender policies at transathlete.com.

Male to Female. Athletes that are making this transition and under quite a bit more scrutiny. Testosterone levels need to be closely monitored. Because in general men are stronger than women, the question that is often asked is that do female athletes, who may have previously trained as men, maintain an advantage, even after transition? (We'll compare some times for Jillian in part 2 of this story.)

Those who transition from male to female are eligible to compete in the female category under the **following conditions of the IOC**.

2.1. *The athlete has declared that her gender identity is female. The declaration cannot be changed, for sporting purposes, for a minimum of four years.*

2.2. *The athlete must demonstrate that her total testosterone level in serum has been below 10 nmol/L for at least 12 months prior to her first competition (with the requirement for any longer period to be based on a confidential case-by-case evaluation, considering whether or not 12 months is a sufficient length of time to minimize any advantage in women's competition).*

2.3. *The athlete's total testosterone level in serum must remain below 10 nmol/L throughout the period of desired eligibility to compete in the female category.*

2.4. *Compliance with these conditions may be monitored by testing. In the event of non-compliance, the athlete's eligibility for female competition will be suspended for 12 months.*



Before transition

Hormones.

Hormone therapy is a necessary part of the gender transition process.

Female to male: This is typically done via testosterone injection. The testosterone increases muscle mass, decreases body fat, deepens the voice, and produces more body hair.

Male to female: Those making this transition will take testosterone blockers (anti-androgens) to lower their testosterone levels. They also take estrogen and progesterone, which decreases muscle mass and changes fat distribution¹.

Normal Testosterone levels²:

Men: 9–38 nmol/L

Women: 0.52–2.4 nmol/L

Hormone testing.

Currently there is no "transgender checking." The burden is on the athlete to ensure they are within appropriate hormone levels. If she were to get tested and be out of appropriate range, she could be sanctioned just as any athlete is who is caught doping. Jillian gets her hormone levels checked about every 4 months.

Jillian needed the bike.



Jillian, as Jonathan, had a Cat 1 license as a mountain biker. Cycling was a huge part of her person. It helped her get through a rough time after she lost her brother to suicide.

Once I was in a pretty good place with respect to my brother's passing, I wanted to honor Chris' life and raise awareness for suicide, help other families through their loss of a loved one, and also help prevent further suicides in our community. After hundreds if not thousands of hours on a bike working through Chris' devastating suicide, I came up with an idea for a bike event for suicide prevention. In 2008, a ride called "Ride to Save a Suicide" and a little later a race called the "Turtle Challenge" were born—the latter name reflects my brother's and my love for turtles. [Author's note: I first met Jillian as Jonathan at this ride.]

Cycling was Jonathan's release, and it is also Jillian's.

Jillian wanted to race again, race with the gender she identified with, but she understood that at the time of her initial transition, the rules wouldn't really let her. Jillian is a competitor, but wants to compete fairly. And this is the goal of USA Cycling as they currently crafting their transgender policy.

What is USA Cycling doing to ensure a fair playing field?

The new IOC rules regarding transgender athletes in competition, especially male to female, give specific physiological measurements for athletes to follow, and gives a much better set of guidelines for the National Governing Bodies to create their own policies.

USA Cycling's Technical Director, Chuck Hodge, is the one working on the USAC policy, and when we first spoke (August 2016) the policy draft was in a legal review. It is now out of review and they are working with USADA about impacts of hormones and hormone suppression. They are also working up a methodology of deciding where to "draw the line" in regards to requiring hormone suppression. USA Cycling's goals are to

1. Do the right thing
2. Protect the rights of all USA Cycling members

Lower category, non-elite riders simply self-select gender. The elites, of course, are always under additional scrutiny (though we're seeing more age groupers get caught up in the **RaceClean** initiative) and any elite who has transitioned from male to female will have to be diligent as their hormone levels can be monitored.

For athletes who did not have a racing license prior to transition, there is really nothing they need to do differently. If they've legally changed their name and meet the required hormone levels, then they simply apply for a cat 4/cat 5 license and work their way up to their ability, just like everyone else. The risks they are taking are just like all other athletes – if they win, they may get tested.

But what about the competitor pre-transition who wants to race post-transition? This is a little more complex. So we'll take a look at Jillian as a case study in **Part 2 – Jillian Joins a Race Team**.

References:

1. http://www.transgendercare.com/medical/resources/tmf_program/tmf_program_6.asp
2. <http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=129553>