



Written by [James Murphy](#) on July 16, 2022

UPenn Nominates Male Swimmer Lia Thomas for NCAA Woman of the Year

The University of Pennsylvania (UPenn), an institution founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1740, this week [chose to nominate](#) transgender swimmer Lia Thomas to be the NCAA's Woman of the Year for 2022. Thomas is a biological male who was allowed to compete this year in the women's division for swimming and diving.

Thomas appears to be the only male among 577 graduating student athletes who was [nominated](#) for the award. According to the NCAA, the award recognizes "female student-athletes who have exhausted their eligibility and distinguished themselves in their community, in athletics and in academics throughout their college careers."



William "Lia" Thomas (AP Images)

Thomas previously competed collegiately as a male for three years prior to this season — before he decided he was a female. He was ranked 462nd as a male swimmer — as a female he was ranked number one. Thomas won the NCAA championship in the 500-yard freestyle when he defeated Olympic silver medalist Emma Weyant, who finished 1.75 seconds behind.

Thomas' success in dominating the Ivy League competition and the NCAA championships led the college sports governing body to change their policy regarding transgender athletes and essentially leave the issue up to the individual sports. Swimming officials have decided to allow a three-person panel of medical experts to determine whether or not "prior physical development of the athlete as a male" gives a person such as Thomas a competitive edge when competing against females.

No fewer than 16 members of Thomas' own team signed a [letter](#) to the Ivy League and UPenn, where Thomas competed, asking them not to intervene on Thomas' behalf:

We fully support Lia Thomas in her decision to affirm her gender identity and to transition from a man to a woman. Lia has every right to live her life authentically," the letter read. "However, we also recognize that when it comes to sports competition, that the biology of sex is a separate issue from someone's gender identity. Biologically, Lia holds an unfair advantage over competition in the women's category, as evidenced by her rankings that have bounced from #462 as a male to #1 as a female. If she were to be eligible to compete against us, she could now break Penn, Ivy, and NCAA Women's Swimming records; feats she could never have done as a male athlete.

Indeed, in one meet last December, Thomas finished the 1,650-yard freestyle a full 38 seconds ahead of



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the second place finisher.

Thomas' teammates chose to not identify themselves in letter, fearing retribution from the school or from transgender activists. Instead, former Olympic gold medalist Nancy Hogshead-Makar sent the letter on their behalf. Hogshead-Makar claimed the female swimmers were afraid that they "would be removed from the team or ... never get a job offer" if their names were made public.

Although Thomas was allowed to compete in this year's NCAA championships, going forward he would have been excluded from competition as the new guidelines require male-to-female transgender athletes to spend three years on testosterone suppressants prior to competing as a woman.

Thomas has reportedly expressed an interest in swimming in the Olympics as a female.

Female tennis legend [Martina Navratilova believes](#) that the contests Thomas competed in were unfair and that perhaps the wins need to be denoted with an asterisk.

"It's not about excluding transgender women from winning ever," Navratilova said. "But it is about not allowing them to win when they were not anywhere near winning as men."

"But right now, the rules are what they are," the tennis legend added. "Maybe put an asterisk there, if she starts breaking records left and right."

Thomas, of course, has not yet won the Woman of the Year award. That won't be announced until the NCAA Committee on Women's Athletics meets and decides the issue this autumn.

But the American sports community has a history of naming transgender people to prestigious awards. In 2015, ESPN gave Caitlyn Jenner — formerly Olympic decathlete Bruce Jenner — the Arthur Ashe Courage Award.

Although the Arthur Ashe Courage Award is not female specific, the award for that year could have gone to inspirational college basketball player [Lauren Hill](#), a female who died in April of 2015 after battling brain cancer.

Instead, Jenner was given the award so that ESPN could check off an intersectional box and show that they were not "transphobic." Jenner took the place of a female athlete who was indeed courageous.

Now Lia Thomas, a male who has already stolen opportunities from many actual female athletes, is taking yet another female's opportunity.



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