

High-profile arguments at elite level are making life lower down less welcoming, writes *Molly McElwee*

In women's sport the phrase "if you can't see it, you can't be it" is widely acknowledged, but the reverse has rung true for trans women, according to swimmer Eden Elgeti. The more visible trans women in elite sport have become, the less inclusive the space at grass roots has felt.

Elgeti took up recreational swimming at a local lido when she began her transition in 2017. Within a few years she started wild swimming in local rivers and ponds, and founded an inclusive swimming club, while Swim England appointed her as an ambassador. The sport became her outlet for physical and mental well-being, and a huge part of her social life.

But all that has changed with the response to high-profile stories of trans women competing in elite sport, such as cyclist Emily Bridges and swimmer Lia Thomas. While the science plays catch-up and sports governing bodies grapple with landing on a fair and equitable solution, the fallout has hit grass-roots and community sport. For Elgeti, the increasingly charged conversation has threatened to rip apart her sporting oasis.

"Probably for the last six months, it's been really difficult to push myself to go and swim with my friends or even with my partner, because I don't feel comfortable," Elgeti, 27, says. "I've been confronted, people who say, 'You shouldn't be getting changed in here' or 'You shouldn't be at this session'. I don't have the mental energy to deal with it, so I've just been excluding myself on the basis of the what ifs, because those conversations are happening more and more, and it's being fuelled by social media, the general media and gender-critical feminists. It's upsetting."

Natalie Bow, a cis woman who plays rugby for amateur Championship club Reading Abbey, says she has been disheartened by her sport's role in the conversation. World Rugby was the first international sports federation to block trans women from global competition in 2021, and the sport is often used as an example of where the safety of cis women could be compromised.

While Bow, 31, has never played with or against a trans woman to her knowledge, she is in full support of inclusion and says she has become frustrated at rugby being used as a political football. "It's never been the case where size has mattered in rugby, it's partly why I absolutely love the sport," says Bow, who has been playing for eight years. "I can play anyone who rocks up. It's so inclusive. No one cares what you look like. That's so good for women and young girls to see that anyone can play – whether you're tiny or bigger, rugby is for all. And I think it's such a shame that rugby has been targeted as something that shouldn't be played by trans women."

"I understand that there is a contact element. But at the same time I am 5ft 2in and weigh 60kg,



Sinking feeling: Eden Elgeti says it is now difficult for her to go swimming with her friends or partner because she has been confronted over being a transgender woman

# How grass-roots sport is turning hostile towards trans women

and there are girls who I play against who are over 6ft and weigh a lot more than me. I am still expected to play contact sport against them, so I don't see the safety element as a thing – I think people are really hyping that up."

The Rugby Football Union's guidelines for domestic competition say trans women must apply to play for a women's team, and provide testosterone readings to qualify. Of the 37,000 women who play women's rugby, just seven trans women have applied and been cleared to play by the governing body.

The number of transgender athletes competing across grass-roots level sport remains relatively unknown, as many governing bodies are only starting to collect the data. There are, however, examples of teams such as TRUK United – a side made up of transgender women and non-binary players – who contested a friendly against Dulwich Hamlet Women's team in front of a crowd of 400 people this month.

The Football Association could

not provide participation figures for trans women in football, despite significant red tape involved for any trans players who want to join a club. While the FA is currently reviewing its policy, it has not been updated since 2014, and operates on a case-by-case basis, asking trans applicants to meet hormone-based requirements and provide

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additional evidence of their transition.

Some have argued that the rules are unnecessarily invasive for amateurs wanting to go for a kickabout on a Sunday. Manchester Laces, a club open to women and non-binary people, started a campaign last year calling for the FA to remove requirements such as hormone readings for amateur players, and clubs representing

over 4,000 players have supported their movement.

This discourse within competitive sport was partly why Elgeti avoided getting involved in rugby, which she had played prior to her transition, because she "didn't really feel comfortable not knowing what other teams would be like".

Swim England, though, has begun to gather data from club members who identify as trans. Those who want to compete at any level need to submit an application; fewer than five have been submitted in the past five years. For Elgeti, who only wants to swim for leisure, it was not a barrier to joining Thames Lido, which is mixed – and neither were changing facilities, which are unisex.

When Elgeti launched her Instagram page, she said it initiated "really wonderful conversations with people", but visits to the Ladies' Pond in Hampstead have become fraught in recent months. Elgeti says new guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, relating to single-sex

spaces at sports clubs, and trans athletes' stories being discussed more, have emboldened those who disagree with trans inclusion in women's spaces.

"I've been confronted a number of times, and it's not very nice. I do feel or sympathise for women who are concerned about having trans women in toilets and changing rooms, because they may have been through some form of trauma – or they are up to a point scared of something. I won't ever debate my own humanity but I don't really feel at home any more in those swimming environments and it's a real shame to not have that. It doesn't matter who you are or your views, we all need to be more compassionate at those higher levels of sport, as that has to then filter down to the lower levels."

For Bow, she thinks future generations will be appalled at sport's current state of play. "I hope in the future we look back and think, 'Oh my God, I can't believe this happened'," she says. "There's no compassion there at all for trans people."