

My name is Carly Smolak. I was a four year starting goalkeeper for the Stanford University women's soccer team, where I earned All Pac-10 Academic team honors. I was selected in the inaugural draft for the Women's United Soccer Association in 2001, the first truly professional women's soccer league in the world, tending the nets for both the San Diego Spirit and the New York Power.

I was lucky to grow up outside of Portland, Oregon in the 80's and 90's, where women's soccer was just as celebrated as men's soccer, and the stands were packed at my high school girls' basketball games. I started playing girls' club soccer starting in third grade, and it is there that my competitiveness, passion and work ethic was first rewarded with success.

Thank God I didn't grow up in Oregon more recently, a state that today is leading the race to the bottom in terms of compromising the integrity of girls' sports. I cannot imagine how the trajectory of my life would have changed if I had to compete against boys. Would my hard work have been rewarded with the starting roles on travel club teams and selections in the Olympic Development Programs that led to my soccer scholarship at Stanford? Would I have wanted to continue playing girls' youth club soccer if I had to compete against physically dominant boys? Would I believe that girls' sports were important if the adults gave boys our starting spots and All-Star selections? Would I have bothered staying late after every practice if I knew a boy would beat me anyway? The answer is no.

Today, we are failing young female athletes. We are forcing girls to choose between playing co-ed sports, or not playing at all. We are telling them that if they can't compete with boys, they might not make the team. We are showing them that even if they are the fastest female athlete on the track, a boy might get the top podium spot. What we are saying is that boys can be better "female athletes" than girls.

Even worse is how we treat girls that do not consent to competing against males. We are training girls to suppress their correct instincts and feelings to cater to the desires of boys. This is nothing short of mass grooming. We are failing female athletes as a society, and we are raising girls who are punished for standing up for what is right and obvious.

Of course this is all couched in the platitudes of "compassion" and "inclusivity." Girls today have to watch as some of the most iconic female athletes of all time equivocate on this issue, presumably to protect their personal investments in pro-leagues with both known and suspected male athletes on payroll, or their carefully crafted reputations built on "acceptable politics" within the women's sports world. What's really sad is that this dream of thriving, highly visible, women's professional sports is in jeopardy if we do not protect the female category. One can only speculate as to why these high profile former female athletes refuse to protect the opportunities they had for the next generation. The public controversy is already here, and it can only get worse when the fan bases of leagues like the NWSL and the WNBA come to find out just how many millions of dollars in salaries, sponsorships, and awards have been given to male athletes. We must deal with this issue sooner rather than later, because the total amount of

money men earn playing women's professional sports accumulates every single year we let this continue. The scandal will only get bigger, the PR only gets worse, and the potential hit to the bottom line of women's professional sports only gets more catastrophic the longer we allow this to go on. If we want to enjoy women's professional sports ten years from now, we need to clean up the mess today.

Our empathy as women is being used against us. Of course we can have compassion for various types of men and boys who conceptualize themselves in different ways. That does not mean we open up the eligibility of women's sports to men who cannot, or do not feel like, competing with other men. Women's sports are not a catch-all for various categories of male athletes, nor are they for men with developmental differences. Women's sports are not for castrated males, chemical or otherwise, nor are they for men who claim they don't "feel like men." Women's sports are for females. Only.

In addition to being a professional athlete, I was also a passionate adult amateur athlete. I found Australian Rules Football a little later in life. I won four National Championships as a player and a coach, and was named MVP in 2016 and 2017. In addition to club football, I represented the United States National Team in the International Cup in Australia in 2017, and was named to the 25th Anniversary All-Star Team.

While my professional soccer career might be considered more impressive to some, my experiences playing Australian Rules Football were some of the most rewarding of my athletic career.

Unfortunately if I discovered Australian Rules Football today, I would not have joined in the first place. I wouldn't have my championships, I wouldn't have my MVP medals, I wouldn't have represented my country, and I wouldn't have some of my closest friends. Because today, there are male athletes competing on women's teams in our extremely physical full contact sport.

While I retired before men joined the league, every year since I have watched more and more men join other women's teams. Finally in 2023, a man joined my beloved former team.

I got sick to my stomach when I saw him in a team photo, and I immediately looked up his name. I saw that he was a former Marine. I saw that he was an ex-con and considered himself a "prison abolitionist." My red flags immediately went up: why did this large former Marine go to prison? Was he there for sexual violence? Were the players safe?

What I would later learn would be the stuff of nightmares. But in the meantime, I had to watch him receive Teammate of the Year, an award typically given to the player who contributed the most to the culture of the team. This is despite the fact that multiple teammates privately described him to me as overbearing and domineering in conversations, and as someone who made people uncomfortable on multiple occasions. One such occasion was when he allegedly brought kink paraphernalia to a club wide function. How someone characterized like that can get Teammate of the Year is baffling. Was awarding it to a male who demonstrated qualities that

would make a female teammate broadly disliked the best way team leaders could demonstrate their “inclusivity”?

It was after that season ended that my worst fears would be realized. I found out that he is a registered sex offender. He had been incarcerated in military prison, serving 15 years of an original 41 year sentence for repeatedly doing things to children under the age of 11 which are inappropriate to repeat here.

When the president of the club was notified of his sex offender status, he quietly asked him to leave the team. None of the players on the women’s team were formally informed that they had been sharing hotel rooms and late celebratory nights with a convicted sexual predator.

Some of the players had been victims of sexual violence. Some of the players are mothers that brought children to games. Some of the players told me they felt uncomfortable around him, but didn’t really know if they could say anything.

The President and the Board of the national governing body were alerted that a convicted male sexual predator was on a women’s team, that he participated in nationally sanctioned tournaments where other women and their children were present, and that the team did not formally notify any of the players of his sex offender status. The official response of the national leadership was that there was no way for them to control personnel decisions of the individual clubs. Of course the obvious solution requires no creativity: enforce a clearly stated policy that women’s competition is exclusively for female athletes.

This “debate” about whether some males are entitled to women’s sports needs to be addressed at all levels of competition: youth, high school, amateur, masters, and professional sports alike. It is not just women at the highest level of competition that deserve safe and fair access to athletics; it’s all of us. Girls should not have to reach an elite status or age into being treated fairly. None of us should be asked to sacrifice our meaningful pursuits of personal excellence, self-improvement, fair competition, or team camaraderie on behalf of men that cannot, or do not feel like, competing against other men.

It is time for the adults and the leaders in our country to stop cowering in silence and hoping someone else takes a stand. The silent majority needs to stop capitulating to the bullying of the activist minority, and add their voices to stand for what is obvious and right. It’s time to rally around our female athletes, professional and amateur, young and old, and show them that they matter and that we care. Women and girls are watching. Thank you.