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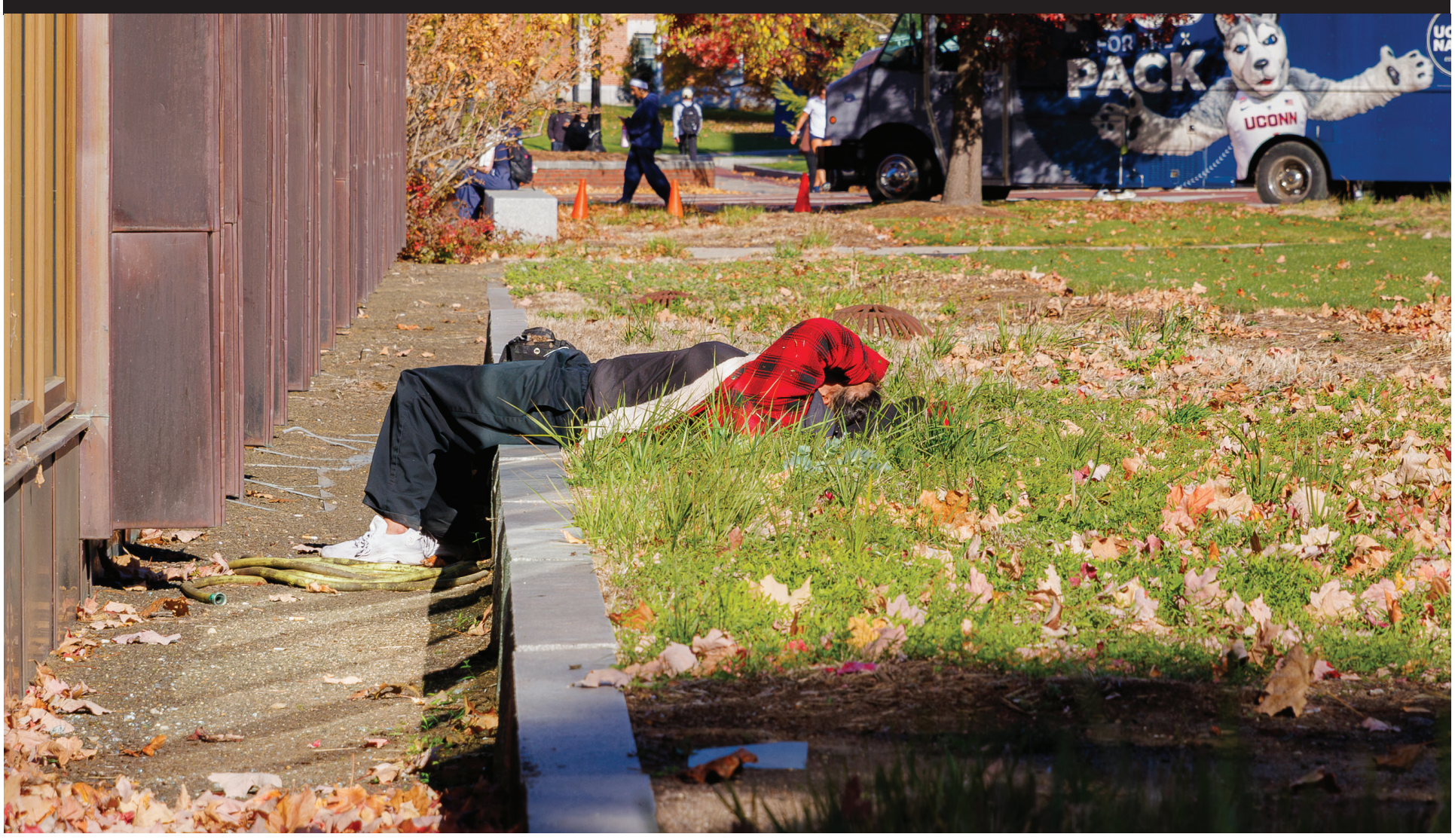

A student relaxes outside McHugh Hall at UConn in Storrs, Connecticut. They enjoyed the sunny fall weather surrounded by colorful leaves.
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EXCLUDING TRANS ATHLETES ISN'T FAIRNESS, IT'S TRANSPHOBIA

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The topic of sports participation is a fraught one within the conversation about transgender rights. Today, many people who otherwise believe themselves to be supportive of trans rights still believe that trans people, particularly trans women, shouldn't participate on gendered sports teams that match their identity. Earlier this year, the Pew Research Center determined that though a majority of Americans support policies aimed at protecting trans people from discrimination in jobs, housing and public spaces, 73% still reported that they are "not at all comfortable" with transgender athletes competing on sports teams that do not match their sex at birth.

The central idea behind this ideology is that it is "unfair" for trans women to compete with cis women in sports due to insurmountable biological differences that give trans women an athletic advantage. However, experts overwhelmingly agree that there exists a serious lack of sufficient study and/or evidence concerning exactly how transgender athletes have a meaningful advantage in sports that is correlated specifically to their being transgender. What transphobes preach as "fairness" in sport has nothing to do with science — it is only fearmongering intended to uphold misogynist and transphobic perceptions.

As the Sociological Journal of Sport explains, the perceived need for gender division in sport hinges upon an acceptance that there is a rigid sex binary between male and female. But, as the journal states, bodies are not binary. Even without taking intersex individuals into account — although we should account for them, as they make up roughly 1-2% of the population, which is about the same as the percent of people who are natural redheads — there is already an incredible diversity of physiology within the categories of cis men and women.

Despite that diversity, opponents of transgender athletes often speak in averages: "on average men are larger," "on average women are weaker," et cetera. But there are some women who are stronger and bigger than some men. Some women have typically "masculine" circulatory and muscular systems. These cases are more common than many people think, but even if they weren't, elite athletes are hardly average specimens. As the International Federation of Sports Medicine noted in their 2021 Consensus Statement, "even the most evidence-based policies will not eliminate differences in sporting performance between athletes in the elite category of female sports. However, any advantage held by a person belonging to an athlete in this category could be considered part of the athlete's unique individuality." This statement affirms that the "biological advantages" of any athlete cannot be wholly eliminated because their biological advantage is what makes any elite athlete special.

Understanding this, it becomes clear that the aggressive regulation of sex characteristics in women's sports primarily serves to affirm misogynist gender segregation and the prevailing idea that women are inherently inferior athletes to men. As University of Birmingham historian Vanessa Heggie explains, since most sports favor anyone with certain "masculine" physiological traits — larger heart and lungs, higher muscle-to-fat-ratio, greater height, et cetera — women who are good at sport will inevitably tend to be more physically masculine than women who are not. Thus, attempts to prevent trans women from competing by regulating the bodies of eligible athletes effectively create a "physiological upper limit" for women's athletic performance. At a certain level of athletic excellence, any woman's physique can be deemed "too masculine," regardless of gender identity, and she can be disqualified. In men's sports, no such regulations exist, even though the same traits would give a man the same supposed advantage over his competitors.

The rhetoric that transphobes use to oppose transgender athletes doesn't have much to do with what is "fair," but simply perpetuates misogyny and transphobia in the internationally visible and influential world of elite athletics. For example, some argue that trans women should not be allowed to compete with cis women athletically lest cis men take the opportunity to pose as women to enter and cheat in women's sporting events — despite there being virtually no evidence to support this. Others lobby for invasive and unethical practices of "sex testing," in which athletic organizations request athletes' birth certificates or irrelevant medical records, hold "nude parades" in which athletes' genitals and other physical sex characteristics are examined, conduct often unspecified medical tests (as with Imane Khelif in 2024) or otherwise attempt to verify athletes' biological sex. These blatantly transphobic ideas are not founded in fairness.

Still, people take these transphobic ideas to heart, and they bring that hatred and fear back to their communities and their children. Earlier this year, a middle school student named Becky argued in front of the Supreme Court for her right, which she argued should be protected by Title IX, to try out for girls' sports in school. The Court ruled against her. Now, trans kids in 27 states are legally barred from playing gendered sports.

The transphobia and ignorance that many ostensible trans allies maintain in their views on athletics isn't immaterial; it actively contributes to the systematic exclusion of transgender people from all aspects of life. If you say that you support trans people, but you still don't think they should compete in sports because it's "not fair," you are just being transphobic. You cannot be a true ally to your transgender neighbors unless you support them all the time, not just on the issues that suit you.



A chalk drawing of the transgender pride flag. Despite the majority of Americans supporting the protection of trans people from discrimination, 73% of Americans report discomfort with trans athletes playing on sports teams which match their gender identity.

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