

making the *TRANSITION*

An athlete *once barred from his team* returns after his sport moves toward inclusivity.

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Members of Fugue, the women's division ultimate frisbee team at the University of Oregon, spreads out across the practice fields next to the newly erected Hayward Field. Clouds fill the sky, and the crisp Sunday morning air engulfs the team as it begins practice.

Among the athletes is Owen Clifton, wearing a white No. 10 jersey and running his fingers through his thick, curly brown hair. A frisbee darts across the field, and Clifton dives for the disc, snagging it midair and crashing onto the cold, damp turf. He quickly hops up and hustles to get back in position. As one of the oldest players on Fugue, Clifton, 23, doesn't hesitate to stop and give out advice to his teammates.

He plays cutter, one of the two main positions in ultimate frisbee, meaning he's usually on the receiving end of a pass. Since joining the team in 2016, Clifton has proven himself to be one of Fugue's top athletes, according to Rachel Hess, a team captain who considers Clifton's presence on the field as "invaluable."

Clifton is also the only team member who identifies as male.

In February 2020, Clifton came out as a transgender man and began taking testosterone. The 19-player club supported his decision, but, at the time, USA Ultimate, the governing organization for ultimate frisbee, had rules preventing any athlete taking testosterone from playing in the women's division. The moment he injected his first dose of the hormone was the moment he was barred from competing with a team he refers to as his "chosen family."

NORTHBOUND

Raised in Fort Worth, Texas, Clifton grew up playing every sport he could. He even started bringing a football to elementary school so the boys would let him join their game at recess. In high school, he played basketball, ran track and field and even hoped to run for a college team.

"It's very apparent that he gets that high from being physical," said Marcia Richardson, Clifton's mother.

He made it into Fugue his freshman year at the UO without ever having played the sport, and he quickly found an inviting

Owen Clifton hopes he can inspire change as he navigates what it's like being a trans athlete during a time of attack from politicians, sports entities and society.



community at his new school. At the time, Clifton presented as a female, the gender he was assigned at birth.

“When I moved out here, I didn’t really know that I was trans, in the sense that I guess I didn’t really have the language to describe what I was going through,” Clifton said.

It wasn’t until he arrived in Eugene that he had even met an openly transgender person. Until then, his only exposure to the concept of being transgender came from “sensationalized” accounts in the media, he said.

His community in Fort Worth offered little diversity from mainstream Christian conservative thought, he said. The church was at the center of his social life; he met the majority of his close friends in youth ministries and other church-sponsored activities. From kindergarten to 12th grade, he attended the same small private school, where he never quite fit the mold most students did.

“It was definitely really isolating,” Clifton said.

He recalled becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the “distinctly feminine” parts of his body as they developed during puberty. Looking back, Clifton attributes this to gender dysphoria, a term describing the “clinically significant distress or impairment” people might experience from identifying as a gender different than what they were designated at birth, according to the American Psychiatric Association.

“It was a lot of general discomfort,” Clifton said. “And it started to affect my mental health from a depression and anxiety standpoint.”

His sophomore year at the UO, Clifton took an art class with Professor Tyrras Warren, a transgender man who also grew up in Fort Worth. Initially connecting over their similar backgrounds, the two began to discuss Clifton’s own gender identity.

“He started talking about his identity,” Warren said. “So, we sort of started developing a rapport over that.”

That same year, Clifton brought up his feelings on the subject in counseling, where he tried to learn where his gender dysphoria stemmed from. After a long and intensive process, Clifton felt confident transitioning was something he wanted to do.

But still, he hesitated. The pushback he’d face from his family troubled him, and he wasn’t sure he knew how to handle it. Two years passed while he wrestled with the decision.

Finally, in February 2020, Clifton took his first dose of testosterone, gave his mother a letter explaining his gender identity, and gave up his spot on Fugue.

“I kind of decided at the end of the day that, for me personally, waiting to start transitioning just because of frisbee wasn’t worth it,” he said.

MISSTEPS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

USA Ultimate, which governs more than 800 collegiate club teams across the nation, implemented its first transgender policy in 2018. The creators originally intended the policy to be an inclusive measure that gave transgender athletes a sense of security. Instead, it ultimately hurt the very athletes it tried to help, according to Ashleigh Buch, a transgender woman and community liaison for USAU.

Buch played on a women’s team in Kansas City in 2017. After writing about her experiences playing ultimate frisbee as a transgender woman, she joined USAU officials to help design the organization’s first official policy outlining transgender and non-binary players’ eligibility.

According to Buch, the policy was similar to the NCAA’s policy. In order for a transgender woman — someone who was assigned male at birth but identifies as female — to compete in the women’s division, they had to be on testosterone blockers for at least a year. Athletes who took testosterone were ineligible to play in the women’s division regardless of dosage, and the policy hardly addressed athletes who identified as non-binary.

“There is a misconception that someone hasn’t ‘fully transitioned’ unless they have hormones for a certain amount of time,” Dr. Christina Milano, a family medicine doctor at Oregon Health and Science University in Portland, said. Milano is not Clifton’s doctor, but she works with patients like Clifton who are pursuing hormone therapy. Milano said transitioning can range anywhere from a pronoun change to extensive medical treatment.

For patients taking testosterone for a masculinizing



Clifton and his professor, friend, and mentor, Tyrras Warren, catch up on a stroll through the University of Oregon campus.

Transgender Participation in Sports

Transgender involvement in sports has long been a controversial issue. CNN reported in April that over 30 states this year alone have attempted to push through legislation aimed at preventing transgender athletes from playing in youth leagues. Transgender women, in particular, face fierce opposition, with many critics claiming that biological advantages make their presence in women’s leagues unfair. USAU is still in the process of updating its leagues’ gendered titles. Fugue already refers to itself as a “womxn’s” team on its website, an alternative spelling of the word women meant to be inclusive.

effect, changes in the body are not immediate; the process can take years, according to Milano. Usually, patients start off with a low dose of the hormone, often via weekly shots. Every patient’s body reacts differently, but generally the process will deepen the voice, speed up the metabolism, alter fat distribution, slow the production of estrogen and halt menstruation, Milano said. Externally, some patients can develop acne, increased hair growth and, depending on their exercise habits, greater muscle mass.

“We’re trying to mimic puberty, essentially,” Milano said.

It’s a relatively misunderstood process, and frightening to Clifton’s mother, Marcia. She had little understanding of what being transgender was before Clifton came out, and

the idea of Clifton permanently altering his body left her fearing for his health and safety.

“I feel like you can read anything medically and find scary stuff about it,” Marcia said.

Clifton self-administers a shot of 0.25 milliliters of testosterone into his abdomen every week. Since he started taking the hormone, he said his mental health has improved drastically.

“I know that some people will think that this is something that I’m choosing to do because I want to,” Clifton said, “instead of something that I’m doing because I need to.”

After USAU’s first policy went into effect, multiple transgender and non-binary athletes contacted Buch, alarmed

with what this meant for their future with the sport. This prompted Buch and other officials to begin designing a new policy. This time, they had a new attitude.

“We were all very adamant that we wanted to approach it with a heart of inclusion,” Buch said, “rather than addressing that question of fairness.”

The “question of fairness,” to her, is often a cynical one. There are discrepancies among all players: strength, height, skill level or experience. Sports by their nature are unfair, Buch said.

“There’s just so many different things that go into it,” she said. “Yet, the one thing that constantly gets focused on when it comes to fairness in sport is gender.”

After a year of collecting data and consulting athletes and advocates, USAU announced its revised policy last December. Now, all incoming athletes will select their gender identity and sign up for the league they feel comfortable playing in, be it men’s, women’s or mixed.

“It was a happy surprise,” Clifton said.

That same month, Clifton traveled to Fort Worth for Christmas, where he saw his mother in person for the first time since he came out. Clifton said she was the “most accepting” she had been.

LOOKING DOWNFIELD

There were many phone calls between Clifton and Marcia after he came out — some bad and some productive, he said. She’s become more accepting of her son for who he is and has made an effort to better understand transitioning. When it comes down to it, Marcia said, a mother’s job is to support her children, and she wants a relationship with her son.


Transitioning is not a solely physical procedure, Milano said. Although testosterone may help someone fit a more masculine profile, facial hair or muscle mass are not the only goals. For Clifton, transitioning is meant to help alleviate the discomfort he’s struggled with for over a decade.

“My mental health is a lot better, and I’m just, as a whole, a much happier person,” Clifton said.

Fugue’s 2021 season has been postponed until the fall due to the pandemic. For now, the team is holding practices on Sundays for three hours and workouts once a week. Clifton keeps pushing himself, eyeing a team captain position next season.

“I don’t really know what kind of adversity I’m personally going to face,” Clifton said. “I don’t know if people are going to be okay with me occupying a women’s space.”

He’ll graduate with a degree in environmental studies in the summer of 2022, at which point he hopes to find work with a national park conducting research to help fight climate change. But for now, he still has one more season to play with his team.

“Fugue is definitely my chosen family up here,” Clifton said. “All of my closest friends are people that I’ve been playing frisbee with.” 

To administer his weekly testosterone, Clifton uses subcutaneous injections that use a .75-inch needle that goes into the fat in his abdomen.



I’m just, as a whole,
**A MUCH
HAPPIER
PERSON.**

Clifton leaps to catch the disc in a drill at a Sunday morning Fugue practice. “He is a pure competitor,” says Fugue captain Rachel Hess.

