

ON THE SIDELINE

Physical education creates experiences that are uncomfortable for students that lack masculinity or athletic ability



AS I WALKED into the auxiliary gym already anxious, sick from pure dread for my first day of this semester's mandatory physical education class, my heart dropped to see a single girl, a close friend, sitting in the sea of boys that weren't like me.

The coach came up to my friend and me and first looked at us, then back at the rest of the class and asked:

"So, are you going to drop?"

I've never heard such a blatantly offensive comment. My heart dropped. The teacher's question lingered in my mind for weeks afterwards. I questioned what about me as a person warranted a comment like this — was it my clothes? Or how I spoke?

Maybe I should drop if the coach clearly feels it would be the "best option" for me this semester.

Spaces like high school gym class pinpoint people that are "different" and put girls and more feminine guys in harmful situations. All eyes are on people that don't appear to be the most skilled or don't show interest in the sport. It feels like there's a spotlight on me at all times, making me feel stuck fighting to be seen as human. The feeling is exacerbated when a coach makes a statement supporting something I've feared for years.

I felt almost ashamed of myself and the fact that my teacher and peers assumed that I would be horrible at anything athletic, strictly based on my friend's and my appearance. It was like the other, more athletic boys had never seen someone, particularly a boy, wearing a knit sweater with jeans instead of Nike shorts and an NFL T-shirt conversing with a girl.

I have never been the most talented

basketball player or the fastest kid in school, but I've also never *hated* sports or athletics. My relationship with sports has been shaped by experiences like this, in settings with other kids that are completely different from

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me in their masculine appearance and aura.

Gym is a required class, and I dread being forced into a place that makes me feel like I'm being slugged in the stomach with a baseball over and over again.

I've literally spent PE classes defending bases while slurs are whispered by runners passing by me. Then if I make a home run, it's "just luck" — the possibility of me being athletically inclined for even a second is unbelievable.

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Feeling constantly pressured to prove myself to people makes me feel so minuscule in gym class. I pressured myself to become the fastest kid in elementary school to prove my masculinity. My asthma didn't matter as much as feeling out of place.

It's not because I wanted people to think of me as athletic, or the most popular person in class, I just want to feel comfortable in a space that isn't necessarily catered to me or my core interests.

It's hard to hear comments from afar on how I missed a ball or how my voice sounds like a "girl." These aggressions, uniquely rooted in how I present myself, become easier for my peers to say or do in a setting where I'm the odd one out.

Maybe I'd be more athletically inclined if there wasn't such a stigma around girls and feminine people participating in gym. It would've been easier to practice my three-pointer or dribbling if I wasn't made fun of every time I hit the court.

It's time for physical education classes as a whole to be more inviting and promote kids that might feel out of place and start accomplishing its goal — to educate students about sports and fitness — for *all kids*.

Throughout P.E. classes, I've been judged for countless things I can't control, had assumptions made about me and even felt *scared* for myself. I hope younger students that also aren't as masculine can feel more comfortable than I have for the past 10 years.

Institutions or schools that have mandatory physical education should show more support to feminine students in an environment that isn't inherently comfortable by educating teachers about how to be inclusive.

Assigning teams and ensuring equal play times are an easy fix to promote participation and give students the opportunity to feel comfortable. Let's welcome all students, different or not, into gym class instead of pushing them immediately back out the door they came in.

LAST ONE STANDING.

An overwhelming amount of students at East and across the US feel uncomfortable in their physical education classes

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN DISCOUNTED FOR IN AN ATHLETIC SETTING BECAUSE OF YOUR APPEARANCE

**Instagram poll of 141 votes*

YES 40%

NO 60%

- Physical activity leads to decreased mental health issues

via **The Atlantic**

- Most adolescents report to participate in PE on 1-2 days a week

via **health.gov**

63% OF FEMALES OR FEMININE PRESENTING STUDENTS HAVE FELT UNCOMFORTABLE IN A PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASS