



≡ Q&A

NOT BACKING DOWN

Former University of Kentucky swimmer **Riley Gaines** tells *American Experiment*'s **John Hinderaker** about her experience competing at the upper echelon of collegiate sports, what it was like to be forced to compete against biological male Lia Thomas at the 2022 NCAA Women's Swimming Championship, and what's at stake for the future of women's sports.

"They were asking us to kindly smile and step aside and allow a male onto our podiums, **taking our scholarships, our titles, our awards, and our trophies, and pretend this was a woman.**"

—NCAA
All-American
swimmer
Riley Gaines

Riley Gaines is an advisor to *Independent Women's Voice* and a recent graduate from the University of Kentucky where

she was a 12-time NCAA All-American swimmer with five SEC titles and a two-time Olympic trial qualifier.

John Hinderaker: Riley, you've become a hero to a lot of people for the way that you have stood up to the extremist trans mob on behalf of women's sports. And I want to talk about that. But first, you're an athlete of very considerable accomplishment.

Riley Gaines: I appreciate that a lot. I have accomplished many things in my career that I will forever be proud of. I'm a two-time Olympic trial qualifier, a 12-time NCAA All-American, and a five-time SEC champion — actually, the SEC record holder in the 200 butterfly, which made me one of the fastest Americans of all time. I was also the SEC Scholar-Athlete of the Year and SEC Community Service Leader of the Year. It was a lifelong journey. It's impossible to put into words the amount of time, sacrifice, and dedication it takes to compete at the highest level.

While you were still at Kentucky and competing in the NCAA, you were among the early women athletes who had an encounter with Lia Thomas and got exposed to the whole trans sports movement. Can you describe that experience?

During my senior year at the University of Kentucky, I made it my goal to win a national title, which would mean becoming the fastest woman in the nation in my respective event. About midway through my senior year, I was ranked third in the country behind one amazing female athlete I knew very well, ranked

second, but one person I had never heard of before. This was the first time I became aware of a swimmer named Lia Thomas. But for all I knew at the time, this was a girl who came out of nowhere, senior year, to post the fastest times in the nation in multiple events, beating everyone else in the country by multiple seconds. It didn't really make sense until an article came out disclosing that Lia Thomas was formerly Will Thomas, who swam three years on the men's team at

tioned this — why does the trophy go to Lia? I understood there was one trophy, and I understood we tied. He looked at me and said, "Well, Lia has to have the trophy for photo purposes. You can pose with this one, but you have to give it back. You go home empty-handed, and Lia takes the trophy home."

That's what ultimately thrust me into this position of no longer being willing to lie, because that's what they were asking us to do — lie. They were asking us to kindly smile and step



Riley Gaines testifying before the U.S. House Homeland Security Committee on May 16, 2023.

the University of Pennsylvania before deciding to transition to the women's team.

This was a mediocre male swimmer at best, ranking 462nd in the nation among the men. At our national championships in March of last year, that first day of competition, I watched on the side of the pool as Lia Thomas swam to a national title beating Olympians, beating American record holders, and beating the most impressive female swimmers in this country by body lengths. The next day of competition was the 200 freestyle, which was the day that Thomas and I raced each other, and almost impossibly enough, we went the exact same time down to a hundredth of a second.

Upon tying, we go behind the awards' podium where the NCAA official looks at Thomas and me and says, "Great job, but you guys tied, and we only have one trophy, so this trophy goes to Lia. Riley, you go home empty-handed." I ques-

aside and allow a male onto our podiums, taking our scholarships, our titles, our awards, and our trophies, and pretend this was a woman.

I knew the unfair competition was wrong, and what we dealt with in the locker room was wrong. But when they reduced everything I had worked my entire life for down to a photo-op to validate the feelings and the identity of a male, that's when I had had enough. That's when I knew I was willing to do whatever it took to fight to protect women and girls in sports.

Have you encountered Lia Thomas in the locker room?

I did at those same national championships. We were not forewarned that we would be sharing a locker room; no one asked for our consent, and we did not give our consent. The only time we became aware that we were sharing this

changing space was when we had to turn around and see a six-foot-four, 22-year-old male, disrobing, dropping his clothes, fully intact and exposing male genitalia, watching other girls undress. It felt like betrayal and belittlement, and it was awkward, embarrassing, and uncomfortable. We all felt it was traumatic. I immediately asked an official, “I want to see the guidelines that allowed someone of the opposite sex into our locker room. What are the rules that allowed this?” He responded, “Oh, we actually got around this by making the locker rooms unisex.”

Any man could have walked into that locker room, and we weren’t told about this. That’s why I say it felt like a betrayal.

It’s been almost a year since this incident happened, and I’ve developed really amazing relationships with Lia Thomas’ teammates who had to undergo this daily. They were gaslit and emotionally blackmailed into silence and made to feel they should apologize for feeling uncomfortable in that locker room. When they sent an email to their administration expressing their discomfort, their administration responded back with, “If you feel uncomfortable seeing male genitalia, here are some counseling resources that you should seek.”

They were forced to go to mandatory LGBTQ education meetings every week to learn about how just by being cisgender, they were oppressing Thomas. They were told, “You will never get a job,” “You will never get into grad school,” “You’ll lose your friends,” and “You’ll lose your scholarship and your playing time if you speak out.” These girls were told, “You can’t take a stance because your school has already taken your stance for you.”

There are significant biological differences between men and women. Apart from just generally being bigger, there are some significant biological advantages that male athletes have. Is that right?

Absolutely. And this is something that you don’t even need a fifth-grade under-



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standing of biology to recognize. Men are taller, but they have larger lungs and larger hearts. They have, on average, 40 percent larger throats than women. Those will never be changed with hormone suppressants. Men will always have an advantage over women, on average, when it comes to something that requires athleticism or strength.

When you’re competing at the level that I was and when you’re doing everything in your power to shave off merely a few one-hundredths of a second, and you’re competing against someone who has 17 percent greater lung capacity, that makes a huge difference, especially in a sport like swimming where you are starving yourself for oxygen and you need to oxygenate your muscles to continue propelling yourself forward. We know testosterone, height, limb size, hand size, and feet size make a difference, but I think lung capacity and the size of your heart are huge differences that will never be mitigated when comparing males to females.

How did you get involved in trying to push back against this?

It was after the trophy scenario that I decided I was going to take a public stance. I called my athletic director at the University of Kentucky, and I told him, “This is what happened, and this is how we feel.” And when I say we, I mean my entire team at the University of Kentucky, which consisted of 40 girls. And I asked him, “How do you feel if I take a public stance in saying that this is wrong?” And he responded back with, “Riley, I love you. I support you. I would support whatever stance you took. Speak

your heart, stay true to your convictions.”

I realize now how naive I was and how grateful I should be to have that kind of support from a university. Because after talking with other girls around the country, my situation is an anomaly. No one else has had that.

Following that, I agreed to do an interview with *The Daily Wire*, which very quickly turned into FOX News and CPAC [Conservative Political Action Conference]. Then I started traveling to college campuses to engage people my age to help them understand my perspective and how we were directly impacted, because I think it’s important that people my age see this.

I was paying out of my own pocket to fly to states to get in front of state legislatures to talk about this, to testify, to do anything in my power that I could to ultimately make a change so no girl or woman has to go through what my teammates and I did. I graduated with a degree in human health sciences and health law, and I had every intention of being in dental school this year, so this is not something I felt equipped for, but I realized what’s at stake if someone doesn’t fight. So, I’ve rerouted my entire life plans and what I thought I was going to do.

What kind of reception have you gotten?

I’ve probably been to 20 or so college campuses all over the country, and for the most part, I’ve been well-received. I’ve had people approach it with their minds made up that I was anti-trans, that

I was hateful, and that I was pushing this agenda of trying to eradicate transgenderism. But as they listen to me and realize how I felt and what we went through, they have their minds changed, which is really powerful.

However, I recently went to San Francisco State University — a different environment — not because I was looking for controversy, but because I knew it was an opportunity to change more minds. But the people I spoke with did not come open-minded. I was met with an ambush. I was physically assaulted. I was held for ransom for over three hours, barricaded in a classroom where the protestors were yelling awful, hateful, vengeful, violent things for hours. They were demanding money from me if I wanted to make it home safely. They said it's only fair that I pay them. They felt as if they were owed something

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because they said they had to listen to me sit there and spread violence for the duration of my speech.

It opened my eyes to how unhinged this group of people can be and what they're willing to do to silence you when they know they don't have the truth or common sense or science or logic or reasoning to dissuade from my argument; they resort to violence. I realized that security is a necessity because, up to this point, I had given everyone the benefit of the doubt since in my heart, there is no hate. There's compassion for every single person. But I feared for my life in those moments.

Did the administration at San Francisco State apologize and try to

make it right?

Absolutely not. They doubled down. They released an email to their student body saying they were proud of their brave students for handling someone who is so abhorrent such as myself, with such bravery and so peacefully.

You have started reaching out on social media to other well-known women athletes, encouraging them to be outspoken in defense of women's sports as you have been. Talk about that a little bit.

For the longest time, I had empathy for these people who have sponsorships and coaches who fear losing their jobs. And I could understand because we live in this cancel culture, unfortunately. But I'm realizing that by being silent, that's how we've gotten here. We can no longer accept silence because silence is now an answer, and it means you don't care about women and girls in sports. It's crucial to call on these women who have platforms, who are athletically successful, who have influence over these sport-specific governing bodies to say that they don't want to compete against men, to say it's wrong, that it's unfair for women to have to compete against men, and it's harassment to ask a girl to change in a locker room with a man. We need these strong, powerful women — such as Venus and Serena Williams. Where are you guys? Ronda Rousey and Katie Ledecky. I mean, the list goes on, of course. We need them, and it's time they speak up because their silence is deafening.

Have some of these women athletes come out in support of women's sports or are they just staying silent?

Publicly, they're staying silent. I have had people reach out to me privately who don't feel comfortable sharing publicly how they feel, which is a step in the right direction, but that's not enough. They are still being publicly silent. At first, I was heartened by the private support, but it's gotten to the point where it's frustrating; we need more speaking out publicly in support of women and girls. We're really at a crucial time right now where every voice needs to be heard. ★

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