

UPenn parent slams college for banning most spectators from sports events as controversy rages over record-breaking transgender swimmer Lia Thomas

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The University of Pennsylvania is banning spectators from winter sporting events due to a rise in COVID-19 cases in the Philadelphia area, which may help the school avoid any controversy over record-breaking transgender swimmer Lia Thomas in the final home meet against Yale and Dartmouth on January 9.

One parent of a swimmer on the UPenn women's team said the university's decision is disappointing and questioned the timing of the announcement - just a day after DailyMail.com reported that some of the swimmers had considered boycotting the event over objections to Thomas's participation.

'How convenient,' the parent told DailyMail.com. 'How convenient that they have now avoided this potential conflict that they're now aware was going to take place.'

UPenn is not the only Ivy League school banning spectators. Columbia will hold sporting events without a crowd for the next three weeks, the New York university announced Thursday. Meanwhile, the conference is desperately scrambling to reschedule basketball games that were postponed due to COVID this season.

A spokesperson for the UPenn swimming team did not immediately respond to DailyMail.com's request for comment.

Parents and a few other guests of team members will still be allowed to attend the final home meet, provided they are vaccinated, but the decision to ban spectators will deprive senior swimmers of supporters in their farewell performance.

'The parents were really amped up for this final home meet, the senior recognition, a chance to show glowing support for the team and for the girls,' the parent added. 'And now that opportunity is not going to be available. It's yet another bit of disappointing news from Penn.'

There have been rumblings that team members are unhappy with Thomas swimming on the women's squad, and some saw the January 8 meet as a way to voice those concerns.

'They've been ignored by both Penn and the NCAA, and there is a feeling among some of the girls that they should make some sort of statement, seize the opportunity while they have a spotlight on them to make their feelings about the issue known,' a source close to the team told DailyMail.com earlier this week.

They've been discussing various possibilities for protest at the January 8 meet, wanting to express their opposition to NCAA rules that allow Thomas to compete on the women's team after completing one year of hormonal therapy, the source said.

They ultimately decided against a boycott, for fear that it would keep them out of the Ivy League championship, where the team's top 17 swimmers - out of a total of 41 - will compete in February.

'Knowing they do not have backing from the school or NCAA, they're reluctant to jeopardize their opportunity to make the elite Ivy League squad,' the source said.

The January 8 meet is the first competition since earlier this month, when Thomas broke two national women's records at the Zippy International in Akron, Ohio.

A week later, two of her teammates spoke out anonymously about their frustrations of having a transgender swimmer compete in female races after spending the first three years at Penn competing on the male team.

While the final home meet is traditionally a time for the school to recognize seniors for their achievements, the swimmers have no illusion that the attention this year will be on Lia Thomas.

'It's a very emotional day and it's supposed to be a wonderful recognition for all the seniors have accomplished over the years,' one source told DailyMail.com. 'These girls are still determined to make sure they get the proper recognition and that their moment is celebrated as it should be.'

Another source told DailyMail.com that will be difficult because Thomas will likely blow away the competition. There's also expectation that the crowd will react by cheering more for the second-place finisher than for Thomas, as occurred at the Zippy International.

'It'll be like the last couple meets,' that source said. 'Lia will finish and nobody will give a sh*t. Then when the first biological female finishes, there will be a huge eruption of applause.'

How Thomas's teammates react may be less predictable.

Some of the swimmers had discussed doing a 'false start, or not swimming the event,' the first source said. 'But it wouldn't be the whole team, so it's an awkward situation.'

So they've been considering alternatives.

'If it were me, I'd step up with a sign on my chest stating something like - 'NCAA - Speak up. We need answers,' the parent of one of the swimmers told DailyMail.com. 'But it's possible the swimmers may end up doing nothing because they are so afraid to be perceived as transphobic.'

The parent said both Thomas and her coach have received anonymous death threats, and that teammates are afraid to inflame the situation. Swimmers also want to avoid clashes with other teammates, who support Thomas' participation and are heeding the school's advisory not to speak to the media.

The current NCAA women's records for those events are currently held by Olympic gold medalists. Missy Franklin holds the record for the 200 Free at 1:39:10. Katie Ledecky set the records for the 500 Free at 4:24:06 and the 1,650 Free at 15:03:31.

Thomas said her pre-transition times are not an accurate gage for her 'current ability' but admitted that she did not train as often or as hard in her year off as she did when competing on the men's team.

Weeks later, Olympic swimming champion Nancy Hogshead-Makar declared in a [column](#) for DailyMail.com that it was not fair for biological women to have to compete against Thomas, just like it was unfair for her to race against doped-up East Germans.

'Trans women should compete with biological women, so long as they can demonstrate that they have lost their sex-linked, male-puberty advantage prior to competition in the women's category,' she wrote in the December 24 column. 'Lia Thomas cannot make that demonstration. While she has apparently been complying with NCAA rules requiring hormone therapy for over 2 ½ years now, she is still competing with an unfair advantage.'

Other sports icons followed suit, expressing their support for Hogshead-Makar's argument that the rules need to be changed.

Tennis great Martina Navratilova retweeted the article, writing, 'A well reasoned and fair take on trans

women inclusion in women's sports.'

Her onetime competitor Chris Evert retweeted Navratilova's statement with the caption 'I second that.'

The team's cone of silence was broken earlier this month when two anonymous swimmers spoke out.

Days later, the Daily Mail learned that parents of about 10 swimmers on the team are demanding the NCAA change rules that have permitted Thomas to dominate.

'At stake here is the integrity of women's sports,' they wrote in the letter obtained exclusively by DailyMail.com and sent to the NCAA and forwarded to the Ivy League and Penn officials. 'The precedent being set – one in which women do not have a protected and equitable space to compete – is a direct threat to female athletes in every sport. What are the boundaries? How is this in line with the NCAA's commitment to providing a fair environment for student-athletes?

Evert later tweeted, 'Science has proved from the onset of male puberty, mainly because of high testosterone levels, male bodies are faster, stronger, and have more endurance than female bodies.'

British Olympic swimmer old medalist Sharron Davies also tweeted a link to Hogshead-Makar's article.

As of Monday, the NCAA had yet to respond to the parents' letter, while the university sent a terse response, claiming the school is doing what it can to help the student-athletes navigate Lia's success, sharing a link to mental health services.