





# Former High School Athlete Works to Protect Women and Girls in North Carolina

By AnnaScott Cross

Payton McNabb had the world at her fingertips until everything changed in the fall of her senior year of high school.

Growing up in an athletic family, Payton started playing sports as soon as she was old enough to walk. By high school, she was an accomplished athlete, playing volleyball, basketball, and, her personal favorite, softball. She and her family had made sacrifices for years to allow her to pursue her love for these sports and the many hours of practice and games they require. But all of this changed on September 1st, 2022.

## The Game That Changed Everything

A senior in high school, Payton was just starting her final season of high school volleyball. On September 1st, her team walked onto the court to play a team that included a biological male athlete who identified as a female. This was a conference game, so Payton's team was required to play despite the fact that some of her teammates were visibly afraid of the risks involved with playing against a biological male.

During the game, the male athlete spiked the ball at an estimated speed of 70 miles per hour and struck Payton in the head. According to the Olympics, the speed of this spike was comparable to the women's world record for spikes in women's volleyball.<sup>1</sup> The force of the hit caused Payton to temporarily lose consciousness and resulted in a severe neck injury and concussion. As a result of this injury, Payton has suffered from severe headaches, vision loss, partial paralysis, long-term whiplash damage, and challenges with everyday activities like her education. She missed the remaining portion of the volleyball season, and

could only participate in her final basketball and softball seasons in limited ways. Her hopes of pursuing sports in college were dashed, and even now – over a year later – she is still dealing with the lasting impacts of her injuries. Her doctors aren't sure if she'll ever make a full recovery.

Now a freshman at Western Carolina University, Payton is not playing sports for the first time in her life. And, because of the extent of her injuries and the complexity of her recovery, she's not sure if she'll ever be able to play again in the future. In addition, due to the lasting effects of the concussion, she has to get special help with her coursework. On top of the physical challenges that she's still dealing with, this has taken a toll on her mental health due to the loss of what had been such a significant part of her life.

## The National Issue

The discussion surrounding whether or not to allow biological male athletes to play on female sports teams based on their perceived gender identity rather than their biological sex became public in the 1970s with a tennis player named Renee Richards, born Richard Raskind. A successful tennis player on

<sup>1</sup> <https://olympics.com/en/news/volleyball-most-asked-questions-womens-volleyball>

the male circuit and an ophthalmologist, Richards underwent so-called “gender reassignment” surgery at the age of 41 and started competing in women’s competitions.<sup>2</sup> This prompted some serious conversations in the athletic world about who qualifies as a “woman.” Obviously, this debate is still going on today.

Fast forward to the present day, and these conversations are again making national headlines. In recent years:

- Celebrity surfer Bethany Hamilton made headlines for refusing to compete in World Surf League events after it was announced that biological males could compete in female competitions.<sup>3</sup>
- Caitlyn Jenner, the Olympic and professional athlete formerly known as Bruce Jenner, sparked controversy by saying that allowing biological males to compete against females “just isn’t fair,” and insisting on the importance of protecting girls’ sports.<sup>4</sup>
- Riley Gaines, an NCAA champion swimmer, started a national movement to protect female athletes after she was forced to compete against and share a locker room with biological male swimmer Lia Thomas, who easily outpaced many successful female athletes who had been training their whole lives.<sup>5</sup>
- More than a dozen female college athletes, including swimmers Riley Gaines and NC State All-American Kylee Alons, recently initiated a lawsuit against the NCAA, accusing the athletic association of violating their rights under Title IX when the NCAA allowed biological males to participate in women’s collegiate sports.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.si.com/tennis/2019/06/28/renee-richards-gender-identity-politics-transgender-where-are-they-now>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/celebrity-surfer-who-lost-arm-in-shark-attack-vows-to-boycott-world-surf-league-events-over-trans-inclusion-policy/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/05/caitlyn-jenner-is-right-about-transgender-athletes/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://rileygainescenter.org/about/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/riley-gaines-college-athletes-lawsuit-ncaa-transgender-policies/>



