



## Schuyler Bailar To Be First Openly Transgender Collegiate Swimmer



Photo Courtesy: Schuyler Bailar

*By Emma Merrill, Swimming World College Intern*

**Schuyler Bailar** is an extremely talented rising freshman on the Harvard men's team.

He is also transgender.

### **A Sport Where Gender Is Black and White**

The gender code in swimming is explicit. It's a sport where the line between "male" and "female" is defined from the moment someone walks on the pool deck. Men and women don't compete against each other. There are men's and women's swim suits, locker rooms, and time standards. While men and women often train together, gender differences are constantly reaffirmed in swimming.

**“Hi, I’m Schuyler! I’m a tomboy!”**

Bailar has been a part of this world of rigid gender differentiation since he was less than two years old. Joining his summer swim team at age four, Bailar then swam year-round for Sea Devil Swimming starting at age nine and switched to Nation’s Capital Swim Club his freshman year of high school.

Bailar was a pretty accomplished female-gender swimmer while at NCAP, having been a part of the former [15-18 U.S. National Age Group record in the girls 400-yard medley relay in 2013](#) alongside World Swimmer of the Year Katie Ledecky. Janet Hu (52.53), Bailar (1:02.54), Kylie Jordan (53.88) and Ledecky (48.04) combined to post a 3:36.99 as the first sub-3:37 in the age division. The record stood for a year until [SwimMAC reclaimed the mark in March 2014](#).

Like many swimmers, Bailar cherishes the sport’s little joys. He especially loves the feeling of release after jumping into the water to escape a hard, stressful school day.

From a young age, Bailar introduced himself as a tomboy. He sported short hair, dressed like a boy, and tried to do everything that boys did—but better. Bailar once arm wrestled every boy in his 5<sup>th</sup> grade class and beat all but one. Things changed when he got to high school. Giving in to peer pressure to conform, Bailar adhered to the code of “typical” girl behavior. But in his head, Bailar knew it just wasn’t who he was.

## **Becoming Himself**

Following his high school graduation in 2014, Bailar began his physical gender transition: female to male. There was never a specific moment when he knew that he was transgender.

Bailar says, “It sort of just all came together over time as I stopped fighting myself and my identity.”

Before coming out as trans, he struggled with an eating disorder, self-harm, depression—you name it. For Bailar, finding personal acceptance was life-changing. He sees coming out as crucial to fixing his other health issues.

Bailar recently opened up to his wider social circle via Facebook that he was undergoing the transition from female to male. He has also made the process public through a Youtube channel, an Instagram account, and a blog. Steps in his transition from female to male include top surgery to remove his breasts as well as starting testosterone. In fact, Bailar’s self-determined MO is visibility in his journey to a legitimate self identity.

Sadly, swimming has been a huge barrier in Bailar’s struggle to accept his own identity. This spring, he had to make the agonizing decision between being a potential record breaker on the Harvard women’s team (which he was initially recruited for) or being on the men’s team. Bailar ultimately realized that no first place at Ivy’s or record-breaking swim could be more important than being himself.

Even after making such a huge decision, being himself in the pool is still difficult for Bailar. It’s not that his teammates don’t accept him as a male, but he still struggles with his body image in the water and being comfortable wearing a men’s suit. After his top surgery, Bailar’s upper body looks like any guy’s—albeit with permanent scars. But, in his head, Bailar obsesses over the lingering femininity of his hips.

His top surgery and choice to take testosterone do not mean that he hates his body. It simply did not match the gender he identifies with. Bailar has accepted his body and has had no problem changing its feminine aspects in order to love it more authentically.

## **A Fresh Start With The Crimson**

Bailar is thrilled to be able to start fresh at Harvard this fall. He says the Harvard coaches have been “absolutely, unwaveringly amazing” about his transition. Harvard Coach **Kevin Tyrell** is looking forward to Bailar’s contribution to Harvard’s team and even beyond the pool.

“I want Schuyler on my team for the same reasons I want all of my athletes. I believe he wants to push himself academically and athletically. When all of our swimmers and divers have this mindset everyone improves daily in every aspect of their lives. This process will contribute to them being outstanding members of society.”

Bailar has a positive attitude about how to approach his next four years in the pool.

“I have no particular goals set like I did on the women’s team,” Bailar says. “I want to do the best that I can and be a good teammate. I want to contribute somehow to the team – even if it’s not with scores. But, sure, I’m competitive as hell and I want to do some winning and beating too.”

First, though he is determined to get back in shape so he can beat the times he achieved as a woman. Following Harvard, Bailar hopes to attend medical school. He also wants to be an activist for other transgender people—while still swimming of course. His message to other transgender athletes is simple:

“Come out. Be visible. Don’t be miserable,” Bailar says. “The world is changing and you do have options.”

## **Bailar Is Not Alone**

In February 2015, a group of Boston University School of Medicine researchers concluded that there is a biological basis for being transgender, undercutting the idea that trans individuals pick whichever gender they feel like. The researchers estimated that transgender people may number one out of every 100. In 2014, there were about 340,000 athletes registered with USA Swimming alone. Simple math hints that there may be thousands of young American swimmers facing similar struggles to Bailar’s. He says that a few of them have already contacted him for advice.

The NCAA policy on transgender student athletes is clear. A trans male like Bailar who has started to take testosterone for a diagnosed Gender Identity Disorder, Gender Dysphoria and/or Transsexualism is permitted to compete on a men’s team.

USA Swimming has a more general policy of inclusion for transgender athletes. Its Code of Conduct says, “discrimination against any member or participant on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, and gender expression is prohibited (304.3.3),” meaning that trans swimmers can participate in whichever gender’s events that they identify with.

## **What We Must Do**

These policies are inclusive. But official policy is only the first step. It’s going to take time to break down gender barriers in swimming. I’ve been struggling with pronouns just writing this article! That being said, there are no excuses for the mistreatment of transgender athletes.

We are obligated as a swimming community to accept all of our members—no matter what they look like, where they come from, or which gender they identify with.

We are obligated to let each other be comfortable in our own bodies at practices and meets.

We are obligated to treat everyone with respect.

These are the aspects of our sport that must become black and white.

[Bailar's Instagram](#)