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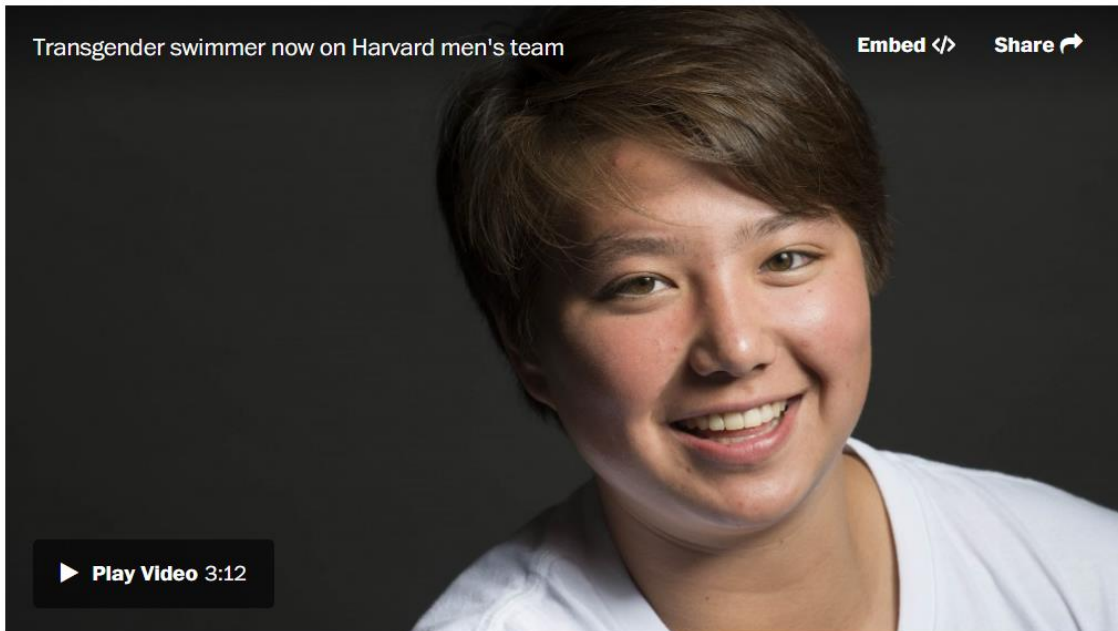


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Recruited by Harvard for the women's swim team, he'll jump into the pool as a man



Harvard recruited Schuyler Bailar, 19, to swim on its women's team. Next season, he'll swim for the men's team after his transition, becoming the first openly transgender collegiate swimmer in U.S. history. (Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)

By [Valerie Strauss](#) June 23, 2015

She was the quintessential recruit for the women's swimming team at Harvard University: a nimble breaststroker with a fierce work ethic and sharp intellect. But when Schuyler Bailar jumps into the school's Olympic-size pool this fall, he instead will be a member of the men's team, the first openly transgender collegiate swimmer in U.S. history.

Emerging from a tortuous year of self-reckoning and a lifelong quest to feel comfortable in his own skin, Bailar, 19, will be navigating far more than the usual freshman challenges; he also will be a pioneer and role model as society openly grapples with shifting mores about traditional male/female gender lines.

Bailar, a 5-foot-8, 170-pound athlete, struggled for years through depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, eating disorders and a broken back. As a girl, Bailar competed at a high level — setting a national relay record on a girls’ team with future Olympic champion Katie Ledecky — but she was confused and pained.

“I was a very lost kid who didn’t understand why I spent my entire childhood being a boy but not really, one who focused intently on studies and swimming to distract from anything that came up in my mind,” said Bailar, who grew up in Virginia and attended the private Georgetown Day School in the District. “I was caught between two worlds.”

He isn’t anymore. Though he bears scars across his chest from surgery to remove his breasts and mammary glands — and he faces some fears about living as a man — he feels better now than he ever has. And the world, so far, has been far more accepting than he imagined.



Schuyler Bailar, who transitioned from female to male during the past year, will attend Harvard in the fall as the first openly transgender NCAA swimmer. Bailar originally was recruited to swim on the women’s team and instead will swim as a man. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

His parents, Terry Hong and Gregor Bailar, told him that they loved him no matter what. When he told his Korean grandmother that he was

transgender, she said: “Well, I knew that. Now I have two grandsons from your mother.”

Then there was Stephanie Morawski, the Harvard women’s swimming team head coach, who first met and recruited Bailar as a young woman but came to realize that the authentic Bailar is a man. Earlier this year, Morawski recommended that Bailar try swimming with the men even though it meant losing a top prospect from the women’s team. Both teams won Ivy League titles in 2014.

“One of the things we all noticed — coaches, captains, team members — is that when Schuyler was passing male, he was very happy,” Morawski said. “Why should gender play a role? Schuyler is a great person. Schuyler wanted to swim and was already accepted to Harvard. . . . Why wouldn’t you want to help?”

Switching squads meant that Bailar would go from being one of the school’s strongest female swimmers to possibly the back of the pack on the men’s team. “It meant giving up the goals I had set for myself as a swimmer,” Bailar said. “But I had to let go of those goals. This isn’t a choice.”

When Morawski asked Kevin Tyrrell, the men’s head coach, whether his team would accept Bailar, the answer came quickly. “We don’t see this as much of a big deal,” Tyrrell said. “Another kid to coach.”

When Tyrrell told the nearly 40-member squad, not a single swimmer raised a concern. Said Kent Haeffner, a rising Harvard sophomore swimmer from Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: “He’s just another member of the team. That’s the way we’ve embraced him.”

That Bailar is being welcomed into Harvard’s swimming community — male and female alike — speaks not only to the teams’ culture, but also to how quickly a national discussion about the complex nature of biological sex and gender has moved into the mainstream, pushed in part by the public

transformation of Caitlyn Jenner, who transitioned from famous male Olympian Bruce Jenner to female this year.



Schuyler Bailar is shown in this 2012 high school photograph, when Bailar was at Georgetown Day School and swam as a girl. Bailar has transitioned to a man and will join the Harvard men's swim team in the fall. (Freed Photography, Inc./Freed Photography, Inc.)

Experts don't know why some people are physically born one sex but psychologically are the opposite, but they believe it results from a mixture of genetics, hormone levels and life experiences. Gender identity generally solidifies for most children between ages 4 and 6, but children who don't feel the way they look don't understand the concept of being transgender.

Bailar says it is difficult to explain how one can be physically born female but feel male; he just knows who he is. He is now taking testosterone, which he says makes him feel moody. As for genital reassignment surgery, he said he is not considering it right now.

"It is important to understand that 'fully transitioning' does not include genital reassignment surgery for everyone," he said. "Fully transitioning is a process defined by each individual."

Bailar has long thought about his gender. As far back as he can remember, he says, he felt he was in the wrong body and couldn't imagine growing up to be a woman.

"When we were young, my dad would sit in the hallway between my room and my brother's and sing us to sleep," Bailar said. "I thought: 'I want to grow up to be like him. I want to be the dad.'"

By second grade, Bailar's best friends were boys. Former Georgetown Day School classmates say everyone saw her as "one of the guys." She played on the boys' soccer team in third grade, and in fifth grade, she arm-wrestled every male classmate, beating just about all of them. When Bailar's breasts developed in sixth grade, she wore a tight shirt under her clothes to bind them. She dressed like a boy, but, Bailar said, "I was never a boy to the boys, and the girls thought I was a tomboy."

A fine athlete, Bailar joined the Sea Devil swim team at age 9 and the Nation's Capital Swim Club team at age 15. Swimming became important after operations on both feet in fifth grade made other sports too difficult.

Bailar was a top student at Georgetown Day School, finding success in the pool and the classroom, but it was joyless.

"Nothing made me happy, not even getting accepted to Harvard," he said. "When you aren't happy with yourself, external things can't overcome that."

In high school, Bailar decided to try to be the girl she believed society wanted her to be. That meant long hair, girls' clothes. Bailar came out as gay and began dating a girl, but that didn't feel right, either. "I knew I wasn't into guys and didn't want to be a girl," he now says. "I was trying to find the right fit for me."

Swimming was his life and his escape. But in August 2012, Bailar broke his back while bicycling, derailing him and keeping him out of the water for months. He developed an eating disorder, and his body-image problems deepened. Even getting back to the pool — and ultimately joining a girls' relay team that set a U.S. record at the time — could not provide relief.

By April 2014, his thoughts had turned suicidal, and it was clear he needed to take a gap year, which Morawski accepted without hesitation. Bailar spent 131 days in a Miami treatment center for eating disorders, facing his

gender confusion, too. He wrote in his journal on July 7, 2014: “Maybe I hate my body because it’s not a man’s.”

In September, when Bailar would have been starting college in Massachusetts, his father came to pick him up from a gender workshop in Miami. “I walked out, crying, and hugged him,” Bailar remembers. “He said, ‘What’s wrong?’ I said, ‘Dad, I think I’m transgender.’ He said, ‘Okay.’”

Though emotionally overwhelming — Bailar spent three days in a hospital for a breakdown — he started telling people what he was going through. He had breast-removal surgery in March, and he moved to Cambridge to assemble a medical support team and to get to know Harvard’s swimming community.

“The common thought amongst all of us was that Schuyler is Schuyler,” said Regan Kology, a distance freestyler from New Jersey who was recruited to the women’s team at the same time as Bailar. “He’s the same, genuine, funny, kind-hearted person, no matter who he chooses to identify as. The fact that he is able to be the person he wants to be makes no difference to us as long as he is happy.”

At first, Bailar planned to present himself as a male at Harvard except while swimming. But Morawski persuaded him to change that plan. She said that Bailar now has no swimming goal other than to keep trying to improve, and she wouldn’t put it past him to get better than many think he can.

“Schuyler is a very hard worker,” she said. “He will challenge himself and be a great teammate and push those around him. Who knows what might happen?”

The NCAA, the major governing body of U.S. collegiate sports, has guidelines for transgender athletes, with different rules for transgender males and females to avoid creating an “unfair competitive advantage” on

gender-separated teams. Bailar fit the criteria for participating on the men's swim team.

The finality of the decision scared Bailar. In April, Morawski pushed him to choose. His journal entry for April 27, 2015, said:

“Her point was SO WHAT about the swimming fast piece. Be on a team that makes you happy. Make the decision sooner than later because it's driving you crazy. . . . Just jump.”

He jumped. He understands it will be difficult, but the swimming is the easy part. Knowing he is a man is one thing; learning to live like one and being accepted are his next big challenges. He has a girlfriend now and is finding his way, one step at a time.

“I can't live inauthentically anymore,” Bailar said. “So do I give up my goal of being a great women's swimmer to be a decent male swimmer at best? Yes. There is pride and glory in this path, too.”