

# Peers embrace teen trans champ

As angry adults duel, competitors share podium in unity



AB Hernandez of Jurupa Valley High School competes in the triple jump Saturday in Clovis (Fresno County) .



Brooke White, left, and Hernandez share the second-place podium for the long jump event.





AB Hernandez leaps off the crash pad while competing in high jump Saturday at the 105th State Track & Field Championships in Clovis, Fresno County .



Beth Bourne holds signs during a protest against the participation of transgender athletes in Saturday's event. Protest attendance, at over a dozen, fell well short of the 50 to 60 the organizer said he expected.

**BY NOAH FURTADO**

CLOVIS, Fresno County — Upon a nine-person podium at the midfield mark of Veteran's Memorial Stadium, 10 girls stood. Among them in the wake of history made in track and field was AB Hernandez, the 16-year-old transgender athlete out of Jurupa Valley High School in Riverside County who became a political punching bag nationwide overnight.

Adults from every aisle vehemently opposed or defended her last week after President Donald Trump's threat to withhold federal funding from the state of California for letting a trans athlete compete in girls sports despite her earning a spot within state rules that have been in place since 2013.

The divisive discourse about Hernandez, whether on social media or at the intersection of Nees and Minnewawa avenues, tried to frame the junior as an outcast in the California track and field community. Protesters at the California Interscholastic Federation's State Championships repeatedly argued that her inclusion in the girls division victimized those who competed against her.

All that said, Brooke White was the happiest victim.

A River City-West Sacramento senior, White shared the second-place podium for the long jump alongside Hernandez, each with their own runner-up medals, in accordance with the CIF's new policy. Controversial as it was for conservatives and liberals alike, it offered an image of unity in the face of that division. White and Hernandez put an arm around each other, giddy as they posed for pictures side by side without a moment to consider the turmoil that surrounded them.



“Sharing the podium was nothing but an honor,” White told the Chronicle. “Although the publicity she’s been receiving has been pretty negative, I believe she deserves publicity because she’s a superstar, she’s a rock star, she’s representing who she is.”

Hernandez tied for second in long jump at 20 feet, 83/4inches, tied for first with two others in the high jump by clearing 5-7 and tied for first in triple jump at 42-23/4, accompanied by at least one peer on all three podiums. Minimal heckling from the stands had diminished by her first podium appearance, with a similarly sized group of roadside protesters already dispersed, leaving Hernandez and her peers to celebrate their accomplishments.

While grown men and women debated Hernandez’s success, her peers on the field didn’t hesitate to share laughs and wide smiles across the two-day event. White greeted Hernandez as a stranger Friday, and by Saturday, they were giggling together as fast friends.

“As a part of the queer community, I want AB Hernandez to know that we all have her back,” White said. “It’s emotional, it gets people heated from all sides of the argument. But when I got here and I talked to AB Hernandez ... I learned to knock out all of the negativity.

“The negativity: It affects us, too.”

Local right-wing activist and blogger Josh Fulfer, 45, tried to suggest such camaraderie — while perhaps genuine in some cases — is spurred by fear of speaking out, citing violence he recently encountered. Fulfer returned to the corner of Nees and Minewawa to continue protests on Saturday after his car window had been shattered the day prior by a counter-protester who wielded what appeared to be a pink-and-blue trans flag and was promptly arrested. Fulfer’s group of a dozen protesting Hernandez’s participation on Friday had grown by several Saturday but fell well short of the 50 to 60 he claimed he expected. A megaphone echoed the message “No boys in girls sports” for the first few hours of the meet.

“There’s a code of conduct that they have to follow,” Fulfer said. “You see what happens to adults that stand up for girls: We’re attacked. Do you think a 16-year-old high school girl wants to have that reputation of being that one? They’re scared to speak out. ... They don’t feel safe. That’s why the adults in the room need to be the voice for them.”

Jeering emerged from the stands for the first time this weekend while Hernandez approached her initial long jump attempt. The few jeerers found themselves among families and fans who chose not to react before a stern voice on the public address system intoned, “We need to stop the disrespect of athletes. ... The only people you are hurting are these athletes on the field. Please show respect to the athletes that are out there, they work hard. You are distracting to all athletes. ... We will continue to pause if this behavior continues.”

Any potential for conflict inside the stadium ended there, and those beyond the grounds of Buchanan High School retreated as nightfall set in. A protester who showed on Day 1 and 2, Gloria Faye Bans, 67, said that Hernandez was a contributing factor to an existing “civil war” in the country: “Bringing immorality is part of the war.” Julie Lane, a member of a local organization called WomenAreReal that has actively protested the participation of trans athletes in girls and women’s sports, claimed the group’s efforts are solely focused on preserving the rights of young girls in sports.

Jillene Wetteland, a senior at Long Beach Poly High School, was not looking to be saved.

Wetteland, Hernandez and Monta Vista-Cupertino junior Lelani Laruelle made room for each other atop the first-place podium in high jump: “I love both of the people I tied with,” Wetteland said.

St. Mary’s-Berkeley junior Kira Gant Hatcher proudly wore her first-place medal that made a matching pair with Hernandez’s in the triple jump, the same event Hernandez placed third in at the CIF state finals a year ago. It didn’t make as many headlines without a political quarrel attached. The one this year, which packed a \$3,000 aerial banner and an arrest into the same afternoon, also spread the spotlight among those willing to share it.

“I feel like all of us, we’re always together over there,” Hatcher said of the girls jumpers. “We see the same people at a lot of meets, so you form friendships.”

A head coach whose team tent was set up along the fence lining that separated protesters from the track at Veteran’s Memorial Stadium heard every megaphone chant and corresponding horn honk. Wary of risking unwanted attention, he requested to remain anonymous but felt obligated to recall his first encounter with Hernandez: She walked by during the first day of prelims, the coach said, as the roadside commotion continued in the background. She carried on without appearing rattled.

Moments after, the coach made a promise to himself: If Hernandez, 16, walked back around, he would assure her to keep blocking out the noise. Why? She is just a kid, he said.

The youngest of four, Hernandez was embraced by fellow athletes, families and coaches more than her mother, Nereyda, could have anticipated after the vitriol they faced from a reported crowd of 30 adults during a track meet at Yorba Linda High School just three weeks earlier.

“There’s just been so much support,” Nereyda said in an exclusive Sunday interview with the Chronicle. “I had coaches approach us yesterday, shake my hand. Parents, you know, they just wanted to let me know, like, ‘Look, we’re not for that,’ and it felt good.

“The whole vibe, it did not feel like pressure, like tense, like it did in Yorba Linda.”

Martial Yapo, an assistant coach at Santa Margarita Catholic in Orange County, said he was reminded of this when he woke up Saturday morning to a CNN segment on Hernandez’s inclusion in the state meet. It took him aback, thinking how Hernandez had been so quickly sensationalized — and how the meet itself fell short of the national hysteria exacerbated by the president.

“Everybody’s supporting the athlete and coaching like normal business,” Yapo said. “We don’t feel like there’s any animosity in the warm-up area or anything like that. It’s only when you’re out there or you watch TV that you see all the noise.”

***Mitch Stephens contributed to this report.***