

Athletes and Domestic Violence

A lady calls 911 and cries that her husband is beating her. She wants to file a report, but then asks the dispatcher if it is going to be in the paper the next day. When the dispatcher doesn't reply, she changes her mind about the report and hangs up (Cart). The lady was Sun Bonds, wife of all-star San Francisco Giant, Barry Bonds. Like the wives of other famous players, she was a victim of spousal abuse. Athletes are praised as heroes for what they do on the playing field, but what they do off the field is never mentioned. As a disappointed sports fan, I want to draw attention to the domestic violence cases that involve athletes.

Athletes have been abusing their spouses since sports were created, but not until the OJ Simpson trial has domestic violence become "the issue du jour." When Simpson was arrested on New Years Day for beating his wife, none of the newspapers reported it. When he pleaded no contest five months later, there was a small brief in the second page of The Los Angeles Times' Metro Section (Cart). In the last three years alone the list of the accused included Dante Bichette, Barry Bonds, John Daly, Scottie Pippen, Jose Conseco, Bobby Cox, Mike Tyson, Warren Moon, Michael Cooper, Darryl Strawberry, Duane Causwell, Olden Polynice, Robert Parish, and OJ Simpson (Callahan, Sports Illustrated). And these are only the pro athletes whose wives had the courage to report the violence.

Madeline Popa, president of Nebraska National Organization for Women stated, "Athletes are role models to small children. [Viewers] worry about the violence on television, but generally that is make-believe. When [there are] real-life heroes [engaging in violence], the message to young boys and girls is, 'If you are a star athlete you can get away with things (qtd in L.A. Times).'"

There is an act of domestic violence every eighteen seconds in the United States. One in every three women will experience it, according to a study done by The L.A. Times. Abuse is the number one cause of injury for women. About six million women are abused each year; four thousand are killed (Cart). Although the sports world is not involved with all of these statistics, they are an important factor as to why the numbers are so high. The survey found that in 1995 there were 252 incidents involving 345 active sports players.

Another survey done by Sports Illustrated reveals that eight to twelve women a year are assaulted by their partners. More women die from abuse than from car accidents and muggings combined. A study done by the University of Massachusetts and Northeastern University revealed that out of 107 cases of sexual assault reported in various universities, most of them involved male student-athletes although they only make up 3.3% of the total male body (Callahan). This means that male student-athletes were six times more involved than males who were not student-athletes.

Despite these studies some people believe that sports does not have a problem with the issue of domestic violence. Richard Lapchick, director of the Center on the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University believes, "These exaggerations [in studies] do not discount that there is solid evidence of a problem in sport" and "Athletes are not necessarily more prone to domestic violence than others (quoted from The L.A. Times and Sports Illustrated)."

Marriah Burton Nelson, author of *The Stronger Women Get, The More Men Like Football: Sexism and the American Culture of Sports*, is one of the many people who disagree with Lapchick. She believes that sports create an aggression found in men who beat their wives. She says,

It is not the sport themselves, but the culture of the sports in which male athlete and coaches talk about women with contempt. The culture of sports is a breeding ground. It begins with the little league coach saying, 'you throw like a girl.' This teaches boys to feel superior. Masculinity is defined as aggression and dominance. In order to be a man you have to be on top, to control, to dominate (qtd in L.A. Times).

Dr. Myriam Miedzian author of *Boys Will Be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence*, agrees with Nelson. He thinks, "Athletes are taught to hurt people. Empathy has been knocked out of them" (qtd in *American Health*). Most coaches do not allow their players to have a real relationship because they are afraid that a female influence will "soften" a player. The athletes are taught not to "see the guy across the line as a human being, how can they see women as human beings? As long as you rear boys to be tough, dominant, in charge, they simply won't be prepared for contemporary women (Miedzian)."

Most researchers agree that one of the main reasons athletes abuse their spouses is because they have grown accustomed to the mistreatment of women which surrounds sports. "Sports culture creates a negative attitude towards women, attitudes of superiority that could lead to violence," says Michael Messner, associate professor of sociology at USC (qtd in L.A. Times). Vance Johnson, a Denver Bronco wide receiver, admits that he did beat his first two wives. He blames his misconduct on himself and on the sports environment he lived in for teaching him that domestic violence is okay. He writes, "Everywhere I looked men abused women...All of the women were really battered and abused emotionally and physically. It was just the way of life no one ever did anything about it (qtd in Vance pg 83)."

Jackson Katz of the Center for the Study of Sports in Society states, "[Athletes] believe they are entitled to have women serve their needs. It's part of being a man. It's the cultural construction of masculinity." "Elite athletes learn entitlement (L.A. Times)."

It is this entitlement given by coaches and fans, who worship star sports figures, that allows an athlete to abuse his spouse without having to suffer the consequences. This sends a message to girls that "If [they] get hurt, nothing will happen to [the perpetrator]. Girls have to stand alone.(Popa)" This leaves women with a feeling of worthlessness. Athletes live with a different set of rules. Dr. Tom House, a Major League Baseball coach as well as a psychologist, believes,

Athletes aren't bad people; they just don't have life skills. Many of these players simply have no thermostats on their behavior mechanisms. When they act out, they are seeking to find some balancing their environment, to see how far they can go. And as long as they can put up good numbers on the field, no one will create boundaries for them (qtd in *American Health*).

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So what is being done to prevent domestic violence among athletes? Very little. The pro league still do not punish perpetrators for their actions. But they have created shelters and organized funds for victims of this problem. Men are now encouraged to see specialists to solve their problem. Newspapers are printing more articles of cases involving

athletes. Now there are daily reports of spousal abuse next to the box scores (I don't know weather to consider this good or bad). "Many men particularly famous athletes, are being held accountable for behavior that was previously brushed aside (Cart)."

Lawrence Phillips, a Heisman Trophy candidate last season, was suspended from his football team because he was charged with spousal abuse. This was done a day after Phillips rushed for 206 yards and scored four touchdowns to give his team the victory. His coach, Rick Osborne, was applauded for taking a stand.

Things are definitely moving forward, but not at a quick enough pace. Rita Smith, coordinator of National Coalition Against Domestic Violence thinks, "Professional sports needs to take a very definitive stand against violence like [it] has with drugs (qtd in L.A. Times)."

Alisa DelTufo, the founder of Sanctuaries for Families, a shelter for abused women, admits, "Domestic Violence is a very difficult cycle for a woman to break (qtd in Sports Illustrated)." And the cycle of abuse is even harder to break in court for a wife of an athlete. "The police often work harder collecting autographs than evidence. The media and the fans, including those on the jury, tend to side with the icon over the iconoclast (Callahan)."

When Sun Bonds finally decided to file a divorce, the judge, who was a baseball fan, awarded her a sum of \$7,500 per month, which is half of what she was supposed to receive. The biased judge then asked Bonds' for an autograph.

We live in a world where men express their manliness by demeaning women. Where men are encouraged to act aggressive and dominant. Where men when asked, 'what are they going to do?' after they lost a game reply, 'I'm going home to beat my wife (all-star, Charles Barkley).' Unfortunately this is the reality we live in. Sport associations need to set rules and punishments for a player who abuses his spouse. They can punish an athlete for using drugs, why can't they do the same for perpetrators of domestic violence? I think coaches should discourage the bad-mouthing of women that takes place in the locker room, and encourage them to see counselors. The fact is as soon as an athlete puts on his uniform for the first time; he is viewed as a role model, whether he likes it or not. I agree that the recent attention means we are now taking domestic violence more seriously, but the victims of abuse want solutions, not publicity.

Works Cited

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