

Outside the Frame: Newspaper Coverage of the Sugar Ray Leonard Wife Abuse Story

Michael A. Messner
University of Southern California

William S. Solomon
Rutgers University

This article analyzes the print media's ideological framing of the 1991 story of boxer Sugar Ray Leonard's admission of having physically abused his wife and abused cocaine and alcohol. We examined all news stories and editorials on the Leonard story in two major daily newspapers and one national sports daily. We found that all three papers framed the story as a "drug story," while ignoring or marginalizing the "wife abuse" story. We argue that sports writers utilized an existing ideological "jocks-on-drugs" media package that framed this story as a moral drama of individual sin and public redemption. Finally, we describe and analyze the mechanisms through which the wife abuse story was ignored or marginalized.

Cette étude porte sur le cadre idéologique façonné par les média écrits en ce qui concerne la nouvelle de l'annonce faite en 1991 par le boxeur Sugar Ray Leonard qu'il avait physiquement abusé de sa femme et abusé de la cocaïne et de l'alcool. Tous les articles et éditoriaux de deux journaux quotidiens et d'une revue sportive nationale furent analysés. Les résultats indiquent que les trois sources ont repris la nouvelle pour la présenter dans un cadre accentuant l'aspect "abus de drogue" et marginalisant ou ignorant l'aspect "violence conjugale." Il est aussi suggéré que les reporters sportifs ont utilisé un cadre idéologique déjà existant (celui du "sportif dopé") qui eut pour effet de présenter la nouvelle en tant que dilemme moral ou il y a péché individuel et rédemption publique. Finalement, les mécanismes par lesquels l'aspect "violence conjugale" fut ignoré ou marginalisé sont décrits et analysés.

On March 30, 1991, the *Los Angeles Times* broke a story, based on divorce court documents, that Sugar Ray Leonard had admitted to physically abusing his wife, including hitting her with his fists, and to using cocaine and alcohol over a 3-year period while temporarily retired from boxing. Despite the fact that stories of sexual violence, drug abuse, and other criminal activities by famous athletes have become common items in the sports pages, these particular revelations were shocking to many people because Leonard had been an outspoken public advocate for "just say no to drugs" campaigns, and he publicly had traded on his image

Michael A. Messner is with the Department of Sociology and Program for the Study of Women and Men in Society, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-2539. William S. Solomon is with the Department of Journalism and Mass Media, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08903.

of a good family man. Thus, revelations of his family violence and drug abuse left him open to charges of hypocrisy, to public humiliation, and to permanent loss of his hero status.

This paper explores how this story was framed by three major newspapers. We will argue that despite the fact that the "wife abuse" part of the story was potentially every bit as important as the "drug abuse" part of the story, all three newspapers rapidly framed the Sugar Ray Leonard story as a drug story and ignored or marginalized the wife abuse part of the story. This, we will suggest, is a result of two factors. First, by the late 1980s, sports media had developed a prepackaged news frame that presented "jocks-on-drugs" stories as scripted moral dramas of sin and redemption. This news frame offered reporters and commentators a ready-made formula for packaging, presenting, and analyzing the social and moral meanings of the Sugar Ray Leonard story. Second, there is no such familiar formula for reporting and analyzing wife abuse by a famous athlete. In fact, despite the fact that domestic violence has been redefined by the women's movement as a public issue, it is still a stubbornly persistent aspect of patriarchal ideology to view wife abuse as a private matter (Kurz, 1989).

News Frames and Patriarchal Ideology

For public issues, the social construction of a problem occurs in good part through the mass news media. In reporting an occurrence, the media define it and explain how it is to be understood through the use of a "frame," a context for viewing the story (Gitlin, 1979; Goffman, 1974). A news frame is how the media assign meaning to an event or occurrence; the news frame determines what is highlighted, emphasized, ignored, or marginalized. A news frame is therefore an inherently ideological construct, but it rarely appears so. This is because although news frames ultimately impose preferred meanings on a public story, these meanings are commonly drawn from socially shared (hegemonic) understandings of the world (Gitlin, 1979).

The news framing process itself is often a contested process, wherein different groups may have "differing and sometimes competing uses for the same occurrence" (Molotch & Lester, 1974, p. 103). News coverage of an occurrence, then, reflects in part the ability of various social or political interests to influence the news framing process so that it is compatible with their beliefs and values. For instance, because the U.S. corporate sector and the federal government are closely linked, economically and ideologically, to the mainstream U.S. media (Bagdikian, 1990; Dreier, 1982), they are at a powerful advantage, relative to other collectivities or individuals, in influencing this process. This corporate/governmental advantage in shaping news frames is illustrated in analyses of news coverage of "accidents" at nuclear power plants (Mazur, 1984) and the U.S.-sponsored war in El Salvador (Solomon, 1992). Rather than a mirror of reality, then, the national news agenda may be seen as a construct of a highly centralized apparatus embedded in the political and economic structure.

The framing of sports stories is less likely to be directly linked to the daily concerns of political and economic elites. But this is not to say that sports reporting is not steeped in dominant values and ideologies (John Hargreaves, 1986). In fact, a number of scholars have argued that sports media tend to reflect—and help to reconstruct—patriarchal ideologies (Bryson, 1987; Clarke &

Clarke, 1982; Jennifer Hargreaves, 1986; Messner, 1988; Willis, 1982). Feminist scholars have illuminated the asymmetrical and masculine-biased ways that electronic and print media cover women's and men's sports and female and male athletes (Boutilier & San Giovanni, 1983; Duncan, 1990; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993; Rintala & Birrell, 1984; Sabo & Jansen, 1992; Trujillo, 1991).

Although studies of newspaper coverage of sports have consistently demonstrated the paucity of coverage of women's sports (Bryant, 1980; Duncan, Messner, & Williams, 1991), there has been very little analysis of the ways that patriarchal ideologies inform the framing of particular stories on the sports pages. One notable exception is Theberge's (1989) analysis of media coverage of a violent brawl in the 1987 World Junior Hockey Championships. Theberge observes that in the immediate aftermath of the incident, there were "competing interpretations" of the causes and meanings of the brawl. In the public debates that followed, feminists argued that the incident was "an instance of a systemic malaise in the sport" that illustrated, in part, "the centrality of violence to the construction of masculine hegemony" (Theberge, 1989, pp. 253-254). But ultimately, this feminist interpretation of the violent event was marginalized in the popular press, and the media's "primary interpretation" (or frame) for the event, drawn mostly from statements by leaders and experts within the sport of hockey, was that the fight was the unfortunate result of a "technical and individual failing" (Theberge, 1989, p. 253). The sport itself, the hegemonic masculine (and corporate) values underlying it, and the "natural" equation of masculinity with violence, thus remained unchallenged.

Theberge demonstrates how an analysis of media coverage of a "deviant event" (an event that demands that sports writers step outside the conventions of everyday reporting and engage themselves in discussion and debate about the social meanings of events) can lay bare the ideological mechanisms that underlie everyday reporting. Theberge makes two important claims that form the theoretical basis of our examination of the Sugar Ray Leonard story. First, patriarchal ideology appears to be a key mechanism in the process of framing sports news. Second, feminism has created a context through which alternative interpretations of news stories have begun to contend with taken-for-granted patriarchal frames. What is the state of play of these two contending ideologies for framing the meaning of contemporary U.S. sports stories? An analysis of the coverage of a story of wife abuse by a popular athlete, we reasoned, might shed light on this question.

Description of Research

We chose to analyze coverage of the Sugar Ray Leonard story in two national dailies, the *Los Angeles Times* (*LAT*), and the *New York Times* (*NYT*), as well as in the now-defunct *National Sports Daily* (*NSD*). We chose the *LAT* because it is the major West Coast daily and because it is the paper that broke the story, the *NYT* because it is the major East Coast daily, and the *NSD* because we thought it might be informative to compare a national paper that specialized in sports coverage. We collected all news stories and editorial columns in the three papers until the story died out as a major news item (see the appendix for a complete list of news stories and editorial columns). This took 9 days, from March 30, 1991, until April 7, 1991.¹ Next, we analyzed the content of the stories.

Our overriding concern was to examine how the story was framed, as a drug story, as a domestic violence story, or as both. Was there a coherent, shared frame in all three papers? What kinds of headlines and subheads were used to introduce the story? What was the content of the photos and their captions? How much space in each story was devoted to discussion of drugs, and how much was devoted to discussion of domestic violence? To what extent were experts drawn upon by reporters and commentators in analyzing the drug or domestic violence issues as social problems? How was the dominant news frame developed, interpreted, solidified, or contested by sports columnists in the days following the breaking of the story?

Framing the Story

Our analysis of the three newspapers revealed three stages in the development of the news frame. Stage 1 was Day 1, when *LAT* broke the story. Stage 2 was Days 2 and 3, when all three papers covered Sugar Ray Leonard's press conference and reactions inside and outside of the boxing world. Stage 3 was Days 3 through 9, when follow-up stories and editorial commentary discussed the meanings of the story.

Stage 1: The Breaking Story

The *LAT* broke the story and featured it as the top sports story of the day. The headline read, "Leonard Used Cocaine, His Former Wife Testifies," while the subhead stated, "Sugar Ray confirms he abused her physically, acknowledges drug and alcohol abuse." The accompanying photo, of the couple smiling and about to kiss each other, was captioned, "Juanita and Sugar Ray Leonard, pictured before their divorce, testified about marital violence and substance abuse." Although the wife abuse issue clearly was a central part of the story, the headlines and the paragraphs that followed revealed a subtle asymmetry in the coverage of the drug angle and the violence angle. The opening paragraph stated that although Leonard "appeared in nationally televised anti-drugs public service announcements in 1989 [he] has used cocaine himself." When Leonard's violence toward his wife was introduced in the third paragraph of the story, we read that Leonard confirmed that "he abused her physically *because of alcohol and drug abuse*" (our emphasis). This was a key moment in the initial framing of the story: Leonard admits to abusing drugs and alcohol, which in turn caused him to abuse his wife.

Now tentatively framed as a drug abuse story, the article cut to several paragraphs of sometimes-graphic testimony from Maryland divorce court records. In these statements, Juanita Leonard said that over a 2-year period, Sugar Ray Leonard often struck her with his fists, would "throw me around" and "harass me physically and mentally in front of the children." He had a gun and threatened to kill himself; he threw lamps and broke mirrors. He once scared her so much that she attempted to leave the house with the children: "I was holding my six-month-old child and [Leonard] spit in my face. He pushed me. He shoved me. . . . I was on my way out the door. He wouldn't let me out. He took a can of kerosene and poured it on the front foyer floor in our house. He told me he was going to burn the house down . . . that he wasn't going to let me leave the house or anything." Sugar Ray Leonard, in his testimony, did not deny any of this. He agreed that he sometimes struck her with his fists, threatened and abused her.

Basic to the initial framing of this breaking story is the way in which the question of why Leonard abused his wife is answered. Juanita Leonard stated that she believed that Leonard's physical abuse of her was caused by his use of alcohol and cocaine. Sugar Ray Leonard also stated that the only times he hit her were when he had been drinking. But when he was asked directly if the "problems between you and your wife" were caused by "the fact that you drank or used drugs," he flatly stated, "No. There was a period in my life when my career had ended temporarily and I was going through a state of limbo, and I wasn't particularly happy with my marital situation." This is a strand of the testimony that apparently was ignored by the reporter who wrote the breaking story. Wife abuse was presented as a secondary issue, caused by the drug and alcohol abuse. Despite this initial drug story frame, the graphic, emotionally gripping testimony about domestic violence left open the possibility that this could have developed into a story about wife abuse. As the story broke, then, the drug story frame was still very fluid, still very much in the making, and potentially open to contest.

Stage 2: Public Issues and Private Matters

On Days 2 and 3, the drug story news frame was solidified, and the wife abuse story was rapidly marginalized. On Day 2, the *LAT* and *NYT* ran major articles covering the press conference that Sugar Ray Leonard held to discuss the revelations about his drug abuse and family violence. On Day 3, the *NSD* ran a story covering the news conference. The headlines of these stories stated, "Leonard Says He Used Cocaine After Injury" (*LAT*), "Leonard Tells of Drug Use" (*NYT*), and "Sugar Ray Tells Bitter Tale of Cocaine Abuse" (*NSD*). None of the headlines, subheads, or lead paragraphs mentioned wife abuse. The photos that ran with the articles showed a somber Leonard apparently wiping a tear from his cheek as he spoke at the press conference. None of the photo captions mentioned wife abuse.

The first seven paragraphs of the *LAT* story detailed Leonard's explanations for how and why he began to abuse drugs and alcohol after his eye injury and retirement, and chronicled his statements that his drug use was "wrong . . . childish . . . [and] stupid." The story also highlighted the fact that "as a role model, he advised that cocaine use is 'not the right road to take,' adding, 'it doesn't work. I'll be the first to admit it. I hope they look at my mistake—and don't use it.'" Finally, in the eighth paragraph, the writer noted that Leonard "declined [to discuss] the physical abuse or suicide threats alleged by his former wife, Juanita, last summer during questioning under oath before the couple reached a multimillion-dollar divorce settlement." The story did not mention Leonard's corroboration, under oath, of his wife's allegations of abuse. Instead, it quoted Leonard's statement at the press conference that he would "be lying" if he were to say that he and his wife never "fought, argued, or grabbed each other," but that "that was in our house, between us. Unfortunately, during the proceedings, which are very emotional and very painful, certain things are taken out of context or exaggerated." At that point, the violence issue was dropped from the story for good. For the next eight paragraphs, the story returned to explanations of Leonard's drug abuse. The final six paragraphs chronicled his statements of remorse for his drug abuse ("I stand here ashamed, hurt") and his statements that his drug abuse is now a thing of the past ("I grew up").

The *NYT* essentially followed suit in framing this as a drug story and almost entirely ignored the wife abuse angle. In the fourth paragraph, the story asserted that “his former wife, Juanita, [said that] Leonard used cocaine on occasion and physically abused her while under the influence of alcohol.” The story noted that “Leonard admitted to substance abuse,” but it did not mention his admission of wife abuse. After nine more paragraphs that discussed the possible reasons for Leonard’s drug abuse, the wife abuse issue was briefly touched upon again, and the “I’d be lying . . . taken out of context or exaggerated” quote closed the issue. Significantly, the *NYT* did not mention (as did the *LAT*) Leonard’s refusal at the press conference to answer questions about the violence issue and his assertion that his physical abuse of his wife is a private matter, “that was in our house, between us.” The story closed just as the *LAT* story did, with Leonard’s message to fans and youths not to take drugs and his assurances that “Thank God I’m matured and became productive again and I’m happy again.”

The *NSD* story on the press conference went even further than the *LAT* and *NYT* in framing the story almost exclusively as a drug story. The first eight paragraphs discussed his admission of drug and alcohol abuse, and noted that once he came out of his retirement and boxed again, his drug abuse ended. “I was again doing what I loved best—fighting,” Leonard stated in the story, “I became a better father and person without the use of a substitute.” The only mention of wife abuse was in the ninth paragraph: “He also physically abused his wife, Juanita, according to sealed divorce documents.” Immediately following this sentence, the story cut to “Leonard said he did not go to a treatment center to stop.” This is a jarring transition. But it is a testament to the extent to which this story had become almost entirely a drug story that the writer did not see a need to explain, after mentioning wife abuse, that he was not referring to a treatment center for stopping wife abuse but, rather, for stopping drug use. Wife abuse was outside the frame.

Stage 3: Redemption

For the next week, all three papers ran follow-ups and editorial commentaries on the Sugar Ray Leonard story. The dominant theme of nearly all of these stories was that Leonard’s redemption from his drug abuse could now be viewed as simply another stage in a heroic career. On April 1, the *NSD* ran a column headline, “This Is the Truth About Sugar Ray: He’s Not Perfect, But, Then, Who Is?” The column celebrated the “love affair” that the people of the United States had had with Leonard: “In Montreal, he fought for us. . . . We applauded [his] courage and we were intoxicated with inspiration. . . . We loved Leonard. We truly did.” The column went on to describe the “shock” we all felt at the revelations of Leonard’s cocaine use. But the entire tone of the column was of Leonard’s redemption and our compassion for him. When we make heroes of athletes, the writer argued, we set them up to fall down. Nowhere in the column was there mention of wife abuse.

The next day, the *LAT* ran a column by the reporter who originally broke the story, headlined “Act of Courage Didn’t Involve a Single Punch.” In the column, the writer admiringly recalled Leonard’s many “acts of courage” in the ring, and argued that Leonard showed this courage again at his press conference, “under the most difficult of circumstances, when he admitted he had used cocaine.” In an almost breathless tone, the writer continually evoked images of

Leonard's courage (nine times), his bravery (three times), and his intelligence. Wife abuse was never mentioned in the column. Leonard was more than redeemed in the eyes of this writer. In fact, this "difficult" incident appears to have further elevated Leonard's status: "The man and his courage. It was a class act." The same day, the *NYT* ran a similar story, "Leonard Hears Words of Support," in which wife abuse was mentioned only in passing. The first paragraph expressed the focus of the article: "The reaction of the boxing world to Sugar Ray Leonard's acknowledgement that he used cocaine and drank heavily in the early 1980's has been mostly sympathetic."

The dominant news frame clearly had solidified: Wife abuse was either completely ignored or marginalized as outside the drug story frame, in all three newspapers. But the dominant drug story frame did not go entirely unchallenged. Three editorial sports writers gave potentially (and partially) oppositional readings to the Sugar Ray Leonard story. An April 4 *NYT* article, headlined "The Danger of 'Arena' Addiction," did not mention wife abuse, but it did draw a connection between the trauma of retirement from sport and the abuse of alcohol and cocaine by athletes. And in an April 3 *NSD* column headlined "Sugar's Confession Can't Blot Bitter Taste," Leonard's press conference was portrayed as a cynical attempt to manipulate public opinion. The writer noted that Leonard "shoved his wife around," but the major thrust of the column was to criticize the ways that the media and the public so easily "forgive our fallen heroes." Leonard's press conference, and its aftermath, the writer argued, can be viewed as a sort of "20th century confessional, the sinner spilling the beans into live microphones. He practices damage control and hopes we see it as contrition. He speaks in a halting voice and weeps on camera. The public relations consultants get big bucks for this advice. Tell all. Throw yourself at the public's feet. People are kind. They'll forgive."

By far the most critical editorial column in our sample appeared on April 7 in the *LAT* (reprinted from the *Washington Post*), headlined "Leonard Roped In: It's All in the Game." Like the April 3 *NYT* article, this editorial was critical of the staging of Leonard's press conference. But this was the only article or editorial in our sample that even began to draw connections (albeit, even in this case, carefully tentative connections) between Leonard's participation in the sport of boxing and his acts of wife abuse: "A common experience among boxing champions has been, like Leonard's, wife trouble. Their history is full of it. It grabbed Sugar Ray Robinson, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Sonny Liston, and even the family man, Rocky Marciano. The multi-wived Muhammed Ali begged the courts that the alimony payments were too great. And Mike Tyson is of course famous for slugging his wife and others, for his vulgar talk. . . ." But, the writer concluded, the boxing world and the sports media have failed to view Leonard's case as another in a pattern of similar occurrences. As a result, the overall impact of Leonard's "fall from grace" amounts to "nothing whatsoever, not even a ripple."

Within the Frame: Sin and Redemption

Stuck (1988) notes that in recent years, public interest in drugs-in-sports stories "seems to rise when yet another 'big name' athlete, collegiate or professional, had died of an overdose of some illicit drug or has been sent to a rehabilitation facility, then seems to subside after the media has had its fill of the story" (p. i). On the other hand, Donohew, Helm, and Haas (1989) observed

that following the drug deaths of celebrated athletes Len Bias and Don Rogers, attention to drugs-in-sports stories actually *declined* in newspapers. The authors speculated that the reason for this decline is that by the end of the 1980s, “the newsworthiness of drug use . . . had run its course. . . . It was no longer news because drug use in the athletic community had come to be viewed as more commonplace.” By then, for instance, “revelations that the New York Giants’ Lawrence Taylor had undergone treatment at a drug rehabilitation center perhaps no longer seemed as important” (Donohew, Helm, & Haas, 1989, p. 236).

We would add that by the end of the 1980s, not only was the drugs-in-sports story no longer big news, but in addition, the sports media had constructed a common news frame for jocks-on-drugs stories that presented “the facts” as well as “the meanings” of these stories as moral dramas of individual sin and redemption. The jock-on-drugs drama became a familiar set of scripted stages: revelations of sin and subsequent public humiliation, shameful confession and promises to never take drugs again, public evangelism to children to say no to drugs, and public redemption.

This script resonates with the ideology underlying the Reagan administration’s “just say no to drugs” campaigns of the 1980s. These campaigns were largely successful in ideologically framing drug problems (and their solutions) as issues of individual moral choice, not as social problems resulting from growing poverty, deterioration of cities and schools, or general alienation and malaise. Sports reporters appear to have accepted uncritically this individual framework of meaning and adapted it to frame the otherwise thorny social issue of jocks on drugs. Moreover, athletes quickly learned to act out their own parts in this scripted morality play, as Sugar Ray Leonard’s tearful press conference aptly demonstrated. When the script is properly played out, within a year or so following the initial public revelation of drug use, public redemption often is accompanied by reinstatement in sport participation. And, as demonstrated by baseball player Steve Howe and others, some athletes have managed to cycle through this script several times. A bonus to Leonard in the media’s largely uncritical reliance on this scripted framework of meaning was the fact that (unlike most jock-on-drugs cases) the public revelation of Leonard’s drug and alcohol abuse occurred several years after his “sins” took place. That he could tearfully (and, we are left to assume, honestly) claim that these were indeed sins that he committed *in the past* meant that there could be a blurring simultaneity to the movement through the drama’s stages: The day after the public revelations, Leonard himself shamefully confessed, apologized, promised that he had not taken drugs for a long time, and evangelized to youths to say no to drugs. Within a few days, playing out their own part in the scripted drama, the sports media granted Leonard full redemption from his sins.

It is important to note, though, that the April 3 *NSD* and April 4 *NYT* editorials offered partially oppositional readings of the Sugar Ray Leonard story. Although they did not challenge the drug frame (one didn’t even mention wife abuse; the other mentioned it in passing), they did challenge the sports media’s complicity in what we are calling the moral drama of individual sin and redemption. In viewing Leonard’s press conference as a cynical manipulation aimed at public redemption, and in discussing athletes’ drug and alcohol problems in terms of the *social* pressures and strains of athletic careers and retirement trauma, these readings at least challenged the narrow individualism of the dominant drug story

frame. These readings hold the potential for broadening the drug story frame to include critiques of commercialized athletic hero worship, including the stress and strain this puts on the heroes themselves. On the other hand, these oppositional readings do not challenge the unspoken patriarchal ideology that led to the ignoring or marginalization of the wife abuse story.

Outside the Frame

By the third day of the Sugar Ray Leonard story, wife abuse was so entirely outside the dominant drug story frame that several follow-up stories and editorials did not mention it at all. But the wife abuse story did not go away entirely. It continued to appear, albeit always very briefly, in some follow-up stories and commentary. When wife abuse was mentioned, it usually was framed in language similar to the following sentence from a follow-up *NYT* story: "his former wife, Juanita, [said] that Leonard used cocaine on occasion and physically mistreated her while under the influence of alcohol." This sentence demonstrates the three ways that the wife abuse story was ideologically managed when it did appear within the drug story news frame:

1. Violence was presented in neutralizing language. The graphic descriptions of Sugar Ray Leonard's violence, threats with guns and kerosene, his spitting in his wife's face and hitting her with his fists that appeared in the original divorce testimony were replaced with more vague and neutral language: Leonard "physically mistreated" his wife.

2. Sugar Ray Leonard's admitted acts of violence were presented simply as Juanita Leonard's "claims." Although Leonard clearly had acknowledged in the divorce testimony that he had committed the acts of violence that his wife accused him of, in nearly all of the follow-up stories, these facts were presented as something that Juanita Leonard said, claimed, or alleged had occurred. The writers did not add that Sugar Ray Leonard himself had acknowledged having committed these acts, thus leaving the impression, perhaps, that these were merely Juanita Leonard's claims, or allegations, not facts.

3. A causal relationship between drug and alcohol abuse and wife abuse was incorrectly implied. Nearly every mention of the wife abuse incidents in the follow-up commentaries implied that drug and alcohol abuse caused Leonard to be violent to his wife. Most often, these articles did not make a direct causal argument ("drugs made him hit her") but, rather, implied the causal relationship by always directly linking any mention of his acts of violent "mistreatment" of his wife with the observation that Leonard had been abusing drugs. Astonishingly, reporters appear to have relied entirely on the self-reporting of Sugar Ray and Juanita Leonard to conclude, all too easily and quickly, that the drug and alcohol abuse caused the wife abuse to happen.² The writers apparently never consulted experts on domestic violence, who undoubtedly would have made two important points.

First, self-reports of perpetrators of wife abuse or of their victims as to why wife abuse occurs are suspect (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992). Wayne Ewing, who works with and studies men who batter, argues that in relationships where husbands batter wives, there is a common "cycle of violence" that includes "the building of tension and conflict; the episode of battering; the time of remorse; the idyllic time of reconciliation" (Ewing, 1982, pp. 5-6). For the male batterer, a key aspect of the stage of remorse is denial of responsibility

for the act of battery. As Ewing puts it, "There is no shock of recognition in the cycle of violence. It is not a matter of 'Oh my god, did I do that?' It is a matter of *stating* 'Oh my god, I couldn't have done that,' implying that *I in fact did not do it*. . . . Remorse, in this model of 'making things right' again literally wipes the slate clean" (Ewing, 1982, p. 6). For the victim who decides (for whatever reason) to remain in a relationship with her batterer, the stage of reconciliation in the cycle of violence often involves at least a partial acceptance of this denial of responsibility: "The man that hit me is not the *real* man that I love, and who loves me." Within this context of denial, alcohol or other drugs can become convenient scapegoats: "It was the booze talking" (and hitting), not the man.

Second, research on domestic violence indicates that while alcohol abuse and wife abuse are statistically correlated, there is no evidence that alcohol abuse causes wife abuse. Numerous studies have shown a statistical correlation between (especially binge-type) alcohol abuse and wife abuse (Coleman & Straus, 1983; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Kantor & Straus, 1987). But the drunken bum theory of wife abuse is largely a myth, as only about one out of four instances of wife abuse involve alcohol (Kantor & Straus, 1987). In fact, in cases where binge drinking and wife abuse occur together, there is considerable evidence that both binge drinking and wife abuse might be a result of what researchers have called a frustrated "power motivation" in husbands (Brown, Goldman, Inn, & Anderson, 1980; Cahalan, 1970; McClelland, Davis, Kalin, & Wanner, 1972). Indeed, Kantor and Straus's research suggests that men who are most likely to commit acts of wife abuse are those men who are most firmly enmeshed in "the cultural tradition which glorifies violence, assumes male dominance, and tolerates violence by men against women" (Kantor & Straus, 1987, p. 225). This sounds remarkably like a description of the world of men's sports, in general, and of boxing in particular (Foley, 1990; Gorn, 1986; Kidd, 1987; Messner, 1992; Sabo, 1985; Whitson, 1990).

Similarly, Ewing points to a general culture of male dominance and a "civic advocacy of violence" as the main antecedents of men's violence against women. He argues, "With respect to the psychological makeup of the abusive male, there is considerable consensus that these men evidence low self-esteem, dependency needs, unfamiliarity with their emotions, fear of intimacy, poor communication skills and performance orientation" (Ewing, 1982, p. 5). This description of the male batterer sounds quite similar to the psychological profile of male career athletes (Messner, 1992). As Horsefall (1991) puts it,

Both wife battering and alcohol use/abuse may be attempts by men with low self-esteem and gender insecurity to decrease both of these deficits by indulging in "appropriate" activities available to them. . . . If their gender identification is positional, their self-esteem shaky, work or sport are closed to them or work is a frustration in itself, then drinking with the "boys" may make them feel like "men." Behaving in an authoritarian way at home may also provide a similar opportunity. Thus alcohol use/abuse and violence towards wives may have similar roots and therefore present as a correlation in some studies. (pp. 85-86)

The idea that masculine emotional socialization, toleration of violence, along with plummeting self-esteem brought on by an insecure public status might

be at the root of both Leonard's drug and alcohol abuse and his abuse of his wife was apparently never entertained by the sports media. To take this approach, of course, would have entailed questioning the patriarchal values system that underlies the institution of sport. Moreover, this line of analysis inevitably would invite serious questioning of the role of violence in sports and the possible links between sports violence with violence in personal life. Young U.S. males do grow up in a society that accepts, even valorizes, violence as a legitimate means of last resort. Sports such as boxing, football, and hockey are surely conveying this pro-violence message to young males (Messner, 1990; Sabo, 1985; Sabo & Panepinto, 1990; Vaz, 1980). And given the misogyny that is built into the dominant culture of men's sports (Curry, 1991; Foley, 1990), the advocacy and celebration of men's athletic violence against each other too often become directly translated into (often sexualized) violence against women (Kaufman, 1987; Koss & Dinero, 1988; Melnick, 1992; Messner, 1992; Sabo, 1986; Warshaw, 1988).

Differential Salience of the Two Frames

In the case of Sugar Ray Leonard, we argue that it would have been analytically fruitful to examine the possible links between two facts: first, here is a man who won fame and fortune by successfully battering other men with his fists; second, once out of the sports limelight, because of what then appeared to be a career-ending injury, he turned to battering his own body with drugs and alcohol, and the body of his wife with his fists. This line of reasoning would draw together what Michael Kaufman (1987) has called "the triad of men's violence": violence against other men, violence against oneself, and violence against women.

That these questions were never acknowledged, much less seriously addressed, is a testament to the extent to which newspapers still form a symbiotic economic alliance with organized sports (Koppett, 1981). But it is probably wrong to suspect a conscious conspiracy to cover up the wife abuse issue. The adoption of the drug story frame and the marginalization of the wife abuse frame are probably largely a function of the saliency of the drug frame as well as the lack of saliency of the wife abuse frame in the public domain. As Gamson and Modigliani (1989) argue, the news media construct, and then draw upon, "media packages" that provide ready-made frameworks of meaning for stories. We have suggested that by the time the Sugar Ray Leonard story broke, a jocks-on-drugs media package was already in place and available for use by reporters. Indeed, there was no apparent difference in the extent to which the writers in all three newspapers that we examined in this study relied on this jocks-on-drugs media package. This package, a moral drama of individual sin and public redemption, framed individual cases of jocks on drugs in such a way that the structure and values of the institution of sport—and boxing in particular—were never called into question. But the narrow parameters of the jocks-on-drugs media package did not go entirely uncontested. We have noted that two follow-up editorials insisted on viewing Leonard's case—at least with respect to drug abuse—within its social context, thus challenging the narrow individualism of the hegemonic jocks-on-drugs package.

In addition to the convenience and ideological saliency of the jocks on drugs media package, the wife abuse story was probably ignored or marginalized because no such ready-made media package exists for wife abuse stories. That no such package exists is probably a result of the fact that both inside and outside the world of sport, there is still a widespread social denial of men's violence against women, especially that which occurs in families (Kurz, 1989). In the Leonard case, the marginalization of the wife abuse story may also be a reflection of the extent to which newspaper sports departments still are relatively unaffected by feminism. Newspaper sports departments, still overwhelmingly male in their gender composition, have been much slower to admit women than other news departments (Mills, 1988). The Association for Women in Sports Media estimates that approximately 9,650 of the 10,000 U.S. print and broadcast journalists are men (Nelson, 1991). And it is likely that a disproportionate number of the approximately 350 women in sports media are in televised sports, not in newspaper sports departments.

Would adding more women reporters change the way that sports news is reported and analyzed? There is some evidence that female sports reporters approach their stories from a more human, less technical point of view than male sports reporters (Mills, 1988). But we tend to concur with Theberge and Cronk (1986) that simply changing the sex composition of the sports newsroom would not drastically change the higher value that reporters tend to place on covering men's sports over women's sports, nor would it drastically change the underlying values and content of the media packages commonly utilized by sports reporters, unless women's sports simultaneously become more highly valued and rewarded than they now are. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a more gender-equal sports newsroom in the absence of a more general feminist revolution in the sports world.

References

- Bagdikian, B.H. (1990). *The media monopoly* (3rd ed.). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Boutillier, M.A., & San Giovanni, L.L. (1983). *The sporting woman*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Brown, S.A., Goldman, M.S., Inn, A., & Anderson, L.R. (1980). Expectations of reinforcement from alcohol: Their domain and relation to drinking patterns. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, **48**, 419-426.
- Bryant, J. (1980). A two-year investigation of the female in sport as reported in the paper media. *Arena Review*, **4**, 32-44.
- Bryson, L. (1987). Sport and the maintenance of masculine hegemony. *Women's Studies International Forum*, **10**, 349-360.
- Calahan, D. (1970). *Problem drinkers: A national survey*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clarke, A., & Clarke, J. (1982). Highlights and action replays: Ideology, sport, and the media. In Jennifer Hargreaves (Ed.), *Sport, culture, and ideology* (pp. 62-87). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Coleman, D.H., & Straus, M.A. (1983). Alcohol abuse and family violence. In E. Gottheil, K.A. Druley, T.E. Koloda, & H.M. Waxman (Eds.), *Alcohol, drug abuse and aggression* (pp. 104-124). Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.
- Curry, T.J. (1991). Fraternal bonding in the locker room: A profeminist analysis of talk about competition and women. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, **8**, 119-135.

- Dobash, R.P., Dobash, R.E., Wilson, M., & Daly, M. (1992). The myth of sexual symmetry in marital violence. *Social Problems*, **39**, 71-91.
- Donohew, L., Helm, D., & Haas, J. (1989). Drugs and (Len) Bias on the sports page. In L.A. Wenner (Ed.), *Media, sports, and society* (pp. 225-239). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Dreier, P. (1982). The position of the press in the U.S. power structure. *Social Problems*, **29**, 298-310.
- Duncan, M.C. (1990). Sports photographs and sexual difference: Images of women and men in the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, **7**, 22-43.
- Duncan, M.C., & Hasbrook, C.A. (1988). Denial of power in televised women's sports. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, **5**, 1-21.
- Duncan, M.C., Messner, M.A., & Williams, L. (1991, January). *Coverage of women's sports in four daily newspapers* (research report). Los Angeles: Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.
- Duncan, M.C., & Sayaovong, A. (1990). Photographic images and gender in *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. *Play & Culture*, **3**, 91-116.
- Ewing, W. (1982). The civic advocacy of violence. *M: Gentle Men for Gender Justice*, **8**, 5-7, 22.
- Foley, D.F. (1990). The great American football ritual: Reproducing race, class, and gender inequality. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, **7**, 111-135.
- Gamson, W., & Modigliani, A. (1989). Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, **95**, 1-37.
- Gitlin, T. (1979). News as ideology and contested area: Toward a theory of hegemony, crisis, and opposition. *Socialist Review*, **9**, 11-14.
- Gitlin, T. (1980). *The whole world is watching*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Gorn, E.J. (1986). *The manly art: Bare-knuckle prize fighting in America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Hargreaves, Jennifer (1986). Where's the virtue? Where's the grace? A discussion of the social production of gender through sport. *Theory, Culture and Society*, **3**, 109-121.
- Hargreaves, John (1986). *Sport, power and culture: A social and historical analysis of sports in Britain*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Horsefall, J. (1991). *The presence of the past: Male violence in the family*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Hotaling, G.T., & Sugarman, D.B. (1986). An analysis of risk markers in husband to wife violence: The current state of knowledge. *Violence and Victims*, **1**, 101-124.
- Kantor, G.K., & Straus, M.A. (1987). The "drunken bum" theory of wife beating. *Social Problems*, **34**, 213-230.
- Kaufman, M. (1987). The construction of masculinity and the triad of men's violence. In M. Kaufman (Ed.), *Beyond patriarchy: Essays by men on pleasure, power, and change* (pp. 1-29). Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Kidd, B. (1987). Sports and masculinity. In M. Kaufman (Ed.), *Beyond patriarchy: Essays by men on pleasure, power, and change* (pp. 250-265). Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Koppett, L. (1981). *Sports illusion, sports reality*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Koss, M.P., & Dinero, T.E. (1988). Predictors of sexual aggression among a national sample of male college students. *Human Sexual Aggression: Current Perspectives. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, **528**, 133-146.

- Kurz, D. (1989). Social science perspectives on wife abuse: Current debates and future directions. *Gender & Society*, **3**, 489-505.
- Mazur, A. (1984). The journalists and technology: Reporting about Love Canal and Three Mile Island. *Minerva*, **XXII**, 45-66.
- McClelland, D.C., Davis, W.N., Kalin, R., & Wanner, E. (1972). *The drinking man*. New York: The Free Press.
- Melnick, M. (1992). Male athletes and sexual assault. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*, **63**(5), 32-35.
- Messner, M.A. (1988). Sports and male domination: The female athlete as contested ideological terrain. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, **5**, 197-211.
- Messner, M.A. (1990). When bodies are weapons: Masculinity and violence in sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, **90**, 203-220.
- Messner, M.A. (1992). *Power at play: Sports and the problem of masculinity*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Messner, M.A., Duncan, M.C., & Jensen, K. (1993). Separating the men from the girls: The gendered language of televised sports. *Gender & Society*, **7**, 121-137.
- Mills, K. (1988). *A place in the news: From women's pages to the front page*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Molotch, H., & Lester, M. (1974). News as purposive behavior: On the strategic use of routine events, accidents, and scandals. *American Sociological Review*, **39**, 101-112.
- Nelson, M.B. (1991). *Are we winning yet? How women are changing sports and sports are changing women*. New York: Random House.
- Rintala, J., & Birrell, S. (1984). Fair treatment for the active female: A content analysis of *Young Athlete* magazine. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, **1**, 231-250.
- Sabo, D. (1985). Sport, patriarchy, and male identity: New questions about men and sport. *Arena Review*, **9**, 1-30
- Sabo, D. (1986). Pigskin, patriarchy and pain. *Changing Men: Issues in Gender, Sex and Politics*, **16**, 24-25.
- Sabo, D., & Jansen, S.C. (1992). Images of men in sports media: The social reproduction of the gender order. In S. Craig (Ed.), *Men, masculinity and the media* (pp. 169-184). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Sabo, D., & Panepinto, J. (1990). Football ritual and the social production of masculinity. In M.A. Messner & D.F. Sabo (Eds.), *Sport, men and the gender order: Critical feminist perspectives* (pp. 115-126). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Solomon, W.S. (1992). News frames and media packages: Covering El Salvador. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, **9**, 56-74.
- Stuck, M.F. (1988). Editor's comment: Drugs and sport, *Arena Review*, **12**, i-iii.
- Theberge, N. (1989). A feminist analysis of responses to sports violence: Media coverage of the 1989 World Junior Hockey Championship. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, **6**, 247-256.
- Theberge, N., & Cronk, A. (1986). Work routines in newspaper sports departments and the coverage of women's sports. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, **3**, 195-203.
- Trujillo, N. (1991). Hegemonic masculinity on the mound: Media representations of Nolan Ryan and American sports culture. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, **8**, 290-308.
- Vaz, E.W. (1980). The culture of young hockey players: Some initial observations. In D.F. Sabo & R. Runfola (Eds.), *Jock: Sports and male identity* (pp. 142-157). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

- Warshaw, R. (1988). *I never called it rape*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Whitson, D. (1990). Sport and the social construction of masculinity. In M.A. Messner & D.F. Sabo (Eds.), *Sport, men and the gender order: Critical feminist perspectives* (pp. 19-30). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Willis, P. (1982). Women in sport in ideology. In Jennifer Hargreaves (Ed.), *Sport, culture, and ideology* (pp. 117-135). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Appendix

Newspaper Stories and Editorials

- E. Gustkey, "Leonard Used Cocaine, His Former Wife Testifies," *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1991, p. C-1. (news story)
- R.J. Ostrow, "Leonard Says He Used Cocaine After Injury," *Los Angeles Times*, March 31, 1991, p. C-1. (news story)
- "Leonard Tells of Drug Use," *New York Times*, March 31, 1991, Section 8, p. 3. (news story)
- D. Steele, "Sugar Ray Tells Bitter Tale of Cocaine Use," *The National Sports Daily*, April 1, 1991, p. 33. (news story)
- T. Egan, "This Is the Truth About Sugar Ray: He's Not Perfect But, Then, Who Is?" *The National Sports Daily*, April 1, 1991, p. 47. (editorial)
- E. Gustkey, "Act of Courage Didn't Involve a Single Punch," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1991, p. C-2. (editorial)
- P. Berger, "Leonard Hears Words of Support," *New York Times*, April 2, 1991, Section B, p. 11. (news story)
- D. Anderson, "The Danger of 'Arena' Addiction," *New York Times*, April 4, 1991, Section D, p. 21. (editorial)
- D. Kindred, "Sugar's Confession Can't Blot Bitter Taste," *The National Sports Daily*, April 3, 1991, p. 7. (editorial)
- S. Povich, "Leonard Roped In: It's All in the Game," *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 1991, p. C-3. (editorial reprinted from the *Washington Post*)
-

Notes

¹The Sugar Ray Leonard drug story continued to be mentioned (secondarily) for several weeks in news stories and columns about other athletes and issues, but not as a story in and of itself.

²As noted, Sugar Ray Leonard himself supplied evidence to the contrary when in his divorce testimony he replied to the question of whether his drug and alcohol abuse

caused him to physically abuse his wife: “No. There was a period in my life when my career had ended temporarily and I was going through a state of limbo, and I wasn’t particularly happy with my marital situation.”

Acknowledgment

The authors thank Wayne Wilson and the library staff of the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles for assistance in gathering the newspaper articles that form the empirical basis of this paper. We are also grateful for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper from Bob Dunn, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Lila Karp, Mariah Burton Nelson, Don Sabo, Nancy Theberge, Peter Donnelly and the *SSJ* reviewers.