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THE TRIAD OF VIOLENCE IN MEN'S SPORTS

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Boys and men learn to bond with each other through sexually aggressive, erotically exciting talk that forges an aggressive, even violent, hierarchical ordering of bodies, both within the male peer group and between groups.
These days, we seem to hear story after story describing male athletes’ violent acts: ritualized hazing on athletic teams, acquaintance rapes and gang rapes of women, and verbal and physical abuse of girlfriends and spouses. Statements of shock and surprise always follow these stories; school officials and coaches, backed up by psychologists and other professionals, vow to develop better means of weeding out the problem players in the future.

A common working assumption is that these violent acts are deviations from the norms of behavior in school and on athletic teams. On the contrary, I believe that far from being an aberration, male athletes’ off-the-field violence stems from the normal dynamics at the center of male athletic culture. Studies of men’s college athletics have shown significant relationships between athletic participation and sexual aggression, and the athletes most likely to engage in sexual and other violent assault off the field play on teams I define as being at the institutional center of sport: basketball, football, and ice hockey.

This issue often raises concerns about race and ethnicity. Indeed, American culture seems obsessed with what Stuart Alan Clarke has called images of “black men misbehaving,” especially if the alleged misbehaviors involve a combination of sex and violence. Because racist stereotypes of black men as violent sexual predators have historically justified the profiling and persecution of African Americans, I’m wary of the ways in which these images continue to surface. When data reveal that college athletes in revenue-producing sports have higher rates of sexual assault against women, the term athletes in revenue-producing sports threatens to smuggle in racist stereotypes as a thinly veiled code for black male athletes.

Maybe more black men are charged with sexual assault in college because more black men play the central team sports of football and basketball. In high schools, where white males are more evenly represented in the student athlete population, white male athletes perpetrate many of the most egregious examples of sexual assault. In Canada, where the central sport, ice hockey, is dominated by white men, the vast majority of sexual assaults by athletes are committed by white males. So I assume that it is not their race or ethnicity but their central position that makes certain male athletes more likely to engage in sexual assault than others.
Most male athletes do not commit off-the-field violence against women or other men. Those who do, though in the numerical minority, tend to come from the center of their athletic peer group, and I believe they are expressing the most honored form of masculinity. The complicity of other men helps to sustain this form of masculinity and to give it power, even though some (or many) men may be uncomfortable with its beliefs and practices. To change this behavior, it will be necessary to confront the root causes of men's violence against women, and to help the silent majority of men move away from quiet complicity with the culture of misogyny, homophobia, and violence at the center of men's sports culture.

**MALE ATHLETES' VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

In a riveting account of the infamous 1989 Glen Ridge, New Jersey, gang rape case, journalist Bernard Lefkowitz describes how thirteen high-status white male high school athletes lured a seventeen-year-old “slightly retarded” girl into a basement. They set up chairs, theater style, in front of a couch. While some boys sat in the chairs to watch, others led the girl to the couch and induced her to begin giving one of the highest-status boys oral sex. As the assault escalated, one sophomore boy noticed “puzzlement and confusion” in the girl's eyes, turned to a friend, and said, “Let's get out of here.” Another senior baseball player felt queasy, thought “I don't belong here,” and left with another baseball player. On the way out, he told another guy, “It's wrong. C'mon with me,” but the other guy stayed. In all, six young men left the scene, while seven—six seniors and one junior—remained in the basement.

While the girl was forced to continue giving oral sex to the boy, other boys laughed, yelled encouragement to their friends, and shouted, “You whore!” at the girl. One boy decided it would be amusing to force a baseball bat up her vagina. When he did this (and followed it with a broomstick), the girl heard one boy say, “Stop. You're hurting her,” but another said, “Do it more.” Later, the girl remembered that the boys were all laughing while she was crying. When they were done, they warned her not to tell anyone and concluded with an athletic ritual of togetherness by standing in a circle and clapping “one hand on top of the other, all their hands together, like a basketball team on the sidelines at the end of a timeout.”

The factors that led up to the gang rape in Glen Ridge are the same factors that studies of men, sexual violence, and sport have pointed to in recent years:

1. Competitive, homophobic, and misogynistic talk and joking
2. A group practice of voyeurism, where boys can watch their friends have sex with girls and sometimes join in
3. Suppression of empathy toward others, especially toward the girls
4. A culture of silence among peers, in families, and in the community

Four football players and wrestlers physically perpetrated the Glen Ridge assault. Three others sat and watched, sometimes laughing or cheering but not joining in. Six boys left the scene.

Although those six boys felt uncomfortable enough to leave, they did nothing at the time to stop their friends, nor did they report the assault to parents, teachers, or the police. And they all refused, during the subsequent long and painful years of litigation, to turn on their male friends and provide incriminating evidence. Their complicity is central.

**SEXUAL TALK AND DOMINANCE BONDING**

Reading and thinking about these issues brought back memories of cut fights, or competitive insults, from my own childhood. I learned in grade school that boys achieve and maintain high status not only through athletic prowess but also through homophobic and misogynistic banter on the playgrounds, streets, and playing fields. The most ruthless cut fighters seemed always able to one-up another boy's insults. Following another boy's cutting insult with silence or with a lame comment like “you, too” left one open to derision.

I learned this firsthand one day while walking home from fifth grade. Chris, a boy well known for his verbal prowess, and I were in a cut fight. I thought I was doing pretty well until Chris hit me with one for which I had no answer: “Messner,” he said, “blow me!” I didn't know what to say back, and so of course I lost. But behind my lack of response was confusion. At eleven, I knew a few things about sex but was unclear about others. I had recently learned that some men had sex with other men. They were called homosexuals, and I was told they were sick and sinful individuals. So, my
confused mind told me, if Chris was saying "blow me," he was in effect asking me to be involved in some homosexual act with him. If homosexuality is such a bad and shameful thing, why did he win the cut fight?

It took me years to figure that one out. Meanwhile, I simply added "blow me" to my own cut-fight repertoire. Now I can see that insults like "you suck," "blow me," or "fuck you" smugly into childhood and early adolescence a powerful pedagogy about sexuality, power, and domination.12 Although children may not fully understand or intend it, through this sort of sexual banter they teach each other that sex, homosexual or heterosexual, is an act of domination and subordination. The men are the ones who are on top, in control, doing the penetrating and fucking. Women or penetrated men are subordinate, degraded, and ultimately dehumanized objects of sexual aggression.

Rarely will two boys alone engage in a cut fight. But put the same two boys in a group and they often feel compelled to insult each other or another boy in the group. A cut fight requires an audience. At center stage are the higher-status boys; around the periphery are the lower-status boys, an admiring audience who, by their presence, attention, and laughter, validate the higher status of the boys at the center. This dynamic starts as early as first grade and is well established by high school.

Trash talking or high school basketball courts and insult talk among teammates off the field have common traits: They establish hierarchies, they involve personal insults or put-downs, often as calls to defend masculinity and honor, and they often degrade objects defined as feminine.13 In men's locker rooms, there is a conversational style of loud, competitive banter and sexual boasting that is clearly intended as a performance for the group audience and that takes center stage. Other, more personal conversations remain marginal, quiet and private, partly because boys and young men have had the experience of being (or seeing other boys) humiliated in male groups for expressing vulnerability or care for a particular girl.14

Boys and men who reveal themselves as vulnerable are subsequently targeted as the symbolic women—the "pussies" and "faggots"—on athletic teams and in other male groups. Most boys learn early to avoid offering themselves as targets for this kind of abuse.15 The power of this group dynamic was illustrated in an interview I conducted with a former world-class athlete who, during his athletic career, had been a closeted gay man. He found that one

of the best ways to keep his sexual identity secret within this aggressively homophobic world was to participate in what he called "locker room garbage" talk about heterosexual conquests.16

But it's not simply fear that keeps marginal boys in silent complicity with the group's practices; it's also pleasure. The bonds of the male peer group often have a decidedly erotic base.17 To say that male groups' dominance bonding is erotic does not necessarily mean that men's bonds in sports are a way of sublimating sexual desire for each other. Undoubtedly, that is true with some boys and men, for whom sports are a heterosexualization process; they learn to repress same-sex desire, which is perhaps sublimated into aggression and eventually converted to sexual desire for women.18 This same-sex desire may remain submerged in the unconscious of young men who define themselves as 100 percent heterosexual, but whether it does or not, the erotic bond among male athletes tends to be overtly coded as fiercely heterosexual. Boys and men learn to bond with each other through sexually aggressive, erotically exciting talk that forges an aggressive, even violent, hierarchical ordering of bodies, both within the male peer group and between groups. To thwart the dominant modes of the peer group is not simply to risk ridicule and ostracism, it also threatens to undermine the major way that young men learn to experience erotic excitement and pleasure with their peers.

VOYEURING: WOMEN AS OBJECTS OF CONQUEST

By the time they were teens, the jocks of Glen Ridge used more than talk for their erotic dominance bonding. They sometimes gathered in a home when parents were away to watch pornographic films and masturbate together. Next they developed a group entertainment called voyeurism, in which one guy at a party would try to convince a girl to go upstairs to a bedroom to have sex. But first his buddies would go up and hide in a closet, under the bed, or behind the door, where they could watch. Sex with a girl, for these guys, was less an intimate encounter with a valued human being than it was the use of a woman's body as a sexual performance for male buddies, a way to create their own porn movie.19

Similarly, the white California high school footballers known in the early
the season, on a road trip, the guys lounged around in a motel room, talking and joking about sex. Drew, our starting center and one of the highest-status guys on the team, noticed that Rob (another marginal player) and I had not been contributing anything to the raucous chronicling of sexual exploits. "Hey, Robby T., hey Mess," Drew asked, "you guys ever had a piece of ass?"

A virgin with little to brag about, I tensed up. Kiss, another reserve player, had recently been labeled the team fag after he refused to jump into the middle of a brawl with another team. I wanted to avoid becoming such a target of joking put-downs, so I employed what I thought was a subtle strategy. "Naw," I replied, but with diverted eyes and a knowing smile I hoped would suggest I was simply too cool to brag about sex with my girlfriend, a high school girl. Rob followed the same strategy. Drew, missing the subtleties, clobbered us: "Wow! We got two virgins on this team! We can't have that! Mess, Robby T., we gotta get you laid, and soon! We can't go having any virgins on the team. Havin' Kiss is bad enough!"

A couple of weeks later, Drew invited us to a party. Robby T. and I showed up together, with our six-packs of beer. Soon Drew announced to Rob and me, loudly, "Hey, you two virgins ain't gonna be virgins after tonight, eli?" Not knowing what he was talking about, we just agreed and laughed. "Sure, Drew. We're trying to figure out who we're going to lay tonight," Drew replied. "Man, you don't have to worry about that, because me and the guys have taken care of it. We got a lady comin' over here in a couple of hours. She's real special, and since you guys are the only two virgins on the team, you get to go first." As I felt my palms get sweaty, I knew I was supposed to act grateful. "Wow, Drew. Like, is she some kind of prostitute or something?"

Drew smiled. "You could say that. She's kind of a friend of mine, you know?" He laughed loud and hard, and so did we. I took some long pulls on my beer, drained it, and opened another one. I whispered to Robby T., "Let's get the hell out of here," and we escaped out the back door.

Rob and I never did find out whether Drew was serious about his plan to get us laid, or if the guys were just pulling a joke on the two lower-status guys on the team. We felt a bit ashamed, and we knew that leaving the party did nothing to enhance our status, so we decided that the way to handle the guys when we next saw them was to lie. We were now laying our girlfriends and
just couldn’t do it with someone else because we were faithful. That’s how we escaped being put in the bag with Kess. We were accepted now; we had learned how to bullshit with the best of them.

After this embarrassing incident, I began to step up the pressure on my girlfriend to put out. Like many young men, I wanted to have sex. But the urgency of my desire was not driven simply by my attraction to my girlfriend. I desperately wanted access to the sexual experience that would put me on a par with the guys on the team. Fortunately, my girlfriend had a mind of her own and asserted her own timetable for what we would do and when we would do it. However, I can see in retrospect how my experiences with my teammates evoked fear, embarrassment, and frustration over my virgin status, and this in turn encouraged a tendency to treat my girlfriend more as an object of conquest than as a person with feelings of her own. This experience eventually helped me to understand how athletic male peer groups’ voyeurism—forming bonds by watching each other have sex or listening to each other talk about sex—works. It doesn’t always lead to gang rape; it can also feed a more private dynamic of date and acquaintance rape, even among young men who are marginal in their athletic peer group.

WOMEN’S SEXUAL AGENCY

As my story suggests, the idea that young male athletes view women as objects of sexual conquest oversimplifies relations between women and men. After all, although I had begun to pressure my girlfriend in order to gain status with my male peers, she did not become a passive object of my actions and desires; she expressed and asserted her own will. When I talk with college male athletes these days, they describe women as anything but passive objects. High-status male college and professional athletes learn to take for granted that some women will seek out sex with them. What Jeffrey Benedict calls the “jock-groupie tango” tends to socialize many male athletes “as an image of women as sexually compliant. The sex-for-fame commerce that exists between athletes and groupies undermines autonomy and trivializes the fundamental component of consent.”

Sports has a subculture of sexually assertive and active women and men, and some antitrape activists may blanch at the ways that women’s “complicity reinforces the athletes’ attitude of sexual license,” fearing that this will fuel the tendency to blame the victim that surfaces when women are raped by male athletes. A fine line has to be navigated here: On the one hand, acknowledging women’s agency risks letting men off the hook and, once again, blaming women for men’s acts of sexual violence. On the other hand, ignoring women’s agency risks academic complicity in seeing women as passive sexual objects. A key, I think, to understanding the complexity of this situation lies in viewing both women’s and men’s sexual agencies as embedded in unequal power relations.

Gail McKabe studied male Canadian hockey players (elite athletes, aged fifteen to twenty) and the women who claim themselves puck bunnies and aggressively seek out sex with the jocks. McKabe says the puck bunnies are “relentless in their pursuit . . . and ‘proud as punch’ to have sex with the jock,” because this will “entitle the puck bunny to ‘bragging rights’?” The male jocks are often happy to have sex with the puck bunnies and even see it as “tangible evidence of their celebrity status.” However, in a crude variant of the madonna/prostitute dichotomy, the jocks tend to define the puck bunnies as “the dirty,” in opposition to girlfriends, with whom they expect to have broader and longer-term relationships.

These activities take place in a decidedly asymmetrical context with respect to gender and social status. The puck bunnies’ attempts to gain status through sex with the high-status males may be a way of resisting the gender and age constraints they face in their communities. But the jocks have high social status as respected male ice hockey players, and this asymmetry serves ultimately to advantage them and to disadvantage the “dirty,” whose bragging rights are short lived. Relations of the two groups ultimately reproduce the social asymmetry.

SUPPRESSION OF EMPATHY

To treat a person as an object of conquest means to suppress empathy for such a person. But boys and men have mothers, sisters, female cousins, and friends whom they know as people and whom they are taught to protect and care for. How can they conjure up the emotional distance to sexually assault women?
Homosocial bonding among men, especially the sort of sexualized dominance bonding I discussed above, is a poor environment for the development of empathy (or respect) for women. The Glen Ridge boys who were most central in the actual assault grew up without sisters, in families headed by domineering male figures. Moreover, their peer group, family, and community experiences taught them to value boys’ and men’s activities over girls’ and women’s. Most of the boys who left the scene and felt uncomfortable with the assault grew up in homes with sisters. They seemed more open to seeing the pain in the victim’s eyes and were less able to suppress their empathy for her.  

**MALE ATHLETES’ CULTURE OF SILENCE**

Why did the six Glen Ridge boys who left the scene remain silent, both on the day of the rape and during the subsequent years of litigation? At least some of these young men were uncomfortable with what happened, even though it was wrong, but nobody in the group raised a hand or voice to stop it. Two other young men did, however. The case broke when another male athlete, who had not been at the scene of the assault, reported to teachers that he had overheard other guys laughing and bragging about the rape. Significantly, this African American young man who blew the whistle had always felt excluded from the tightly knit, high-status clique of white athletes. A second boy, who became an activist in the school and community in his quest to see that the jocks did not get away with their crime, was a long-haired “gigger” (a name for the small minority of radical, arty, antijock students at the school). Both of these boys—one an athlete, one not—were outside the dominant athletic male peer group. Those inside, even those who were marginal within the group, maintained a complicit silence.

This culture of silence is built into the group’s spoken and unspoken codes. The eroticized dominance bond has already established that “the guys” are part of a high-status, privileged in-group (and very little during adolescence can solidify this sort of feeling as much as being part of an athletic team). Others—not athlete boys, racial and ethnic minority boys, girls, parents, teachers, police, and so on—are outsiders. Years of experience within the group taught these boys that they would be rewarded for remaining silent and punished for speaking out. A whistle-blower might be banished from the group and possibly also beaten up, or he might remain in the group, but as a degraded, feminized “faggot” who betrayed the “men.”

**MEN’S VIOLENCE AGAINST OTHER MEN**

In February 2000, a professional basketball player with the San Antonio Spurs, Sean Elliot, announced that he was returning to play after a life-threatening illness that had resulted in a kidney transplant. Considerable media discussion ensued about whether it was appropriate for Elliot to return to play at all, given the risk of further damage to his kidney. Lakers star Kobe Bryant, when asked how he would respond to playing against Elliot, said, “As soon as he steps on the court, that means he’s healthy. I’ll have no problem putting an elbow in his gut.”

Players and coaches know that in order to be competitive, they will need to put their bodies on opposing players in ways that could cause harm. In football and ice hockey, overt aggression against other players is even more intense. One former National Football League player told me that before a playoff game his coach implored his defensive players to hurt the opposing star running back if they could. This is apparently not unusual. A 1998 *Sports Illustrated* cover story on “the NFL’s dirtiest players” admiringly described San Francisco 49ers guard Kevin Gogan’s tendencies, sometimes even after a play had been whistled dead, to “punch, kick, trip, cut-block, sit on or attempt to neuter the man lined up across from him.” Gogan’s coach, Steve Mariucci, approved: “Coaches want tough guys, players who love to hit and fly around and do things that are mean and nasty. Not everyone can be like that, but if...one or two players...are a little overaggressive, that’s great.”

Bodily aggression toward opponents on the field or court, whether of the routine kind that takes place within the rules or the dirty, illegal kind that aims to injure an opponent, is supposed to end when players cross back into the real world. The gentle giant football player who growls, curses, and tears opponents limb from limb on the field but is a kind and caring teddy bear off the field is part of our national lore. But is he real? Or is aggression on
the field related to aggression off the field? Former Dallas Cowboys football star John Niland now says that he and many of his former teammates were involved in drugs, alcohol, and spouse abuse:

I'm not going to name names, but my wife at the time knew of other wives who were abused. . . . We're paid to be violent. We're paid to beat up on the guy across from you. When you're in the game and your emotions are so high and the aura of the whole environment is so unbelievable. When the game's over, technically, it's to be turned off. But you can't. . . . Quite frankly, if you got every player who did drugs or alcohol or played stoned or who was a spousal abuser, you couldn't field an NFL team. It's still going on.32

And consider a comment by NBA coach Pat Riley, of the Miami Heat. Bemoaning an unusually long break between his team's playoff games, Riley said, "Several days between games allows a player to become a person. During the playoffs, you don't want players to be people."33 If it is acknowledged that the supposedly civilizing influences of a player's life outside sports can (negatively!) humanize him, then doesn't it follow that it might also work the other way—that dehumanizing attitudes and experiences within sports might spill over into life outside sports?

BOYS’ EMBODIMENTS OF TOUGHNESS

Most children are taught that it is unacceptable to hurt other people. In order to get athletes (or soldiers) to inflict harm on others, the opponent must be made into an enemy, and the situation must be defined in such a way that it's either the enemy or the athlete himself. As one athlete put it, "Somebody's gonna get hurt. It could be you, it could be him—most of the time, it's better if it's him." The most obvious motive for suppressing empathy is the reward one gets for the successful use of violence. "The coach loved it," the same man said. "Everybody loved it."34 And he received more than just immediate positive reinforcement; he also received a college scholarship, all-American honors, and eventually all-pro status in the NFL.

But rewards do not tell the whole story behind athletes' suppression of empathy for their opponents. In fact, when I probed athletes' early experiences in sports, I found stories not of victories, trophies, and public adulation. Instead, these men were more likely to talk about connection with others, especially fathers, older brothers, uncles, and eventually same-age male peers. For some, sports were the primary or the only site where they connected with their otherwise emotionally or physically absent fathers. Many also said they felt alone, unsure of themselves, and cut off from others, and they found acceptance through sports participation, especially those who had some early successes.

Why sports? An important part of the answer is that boys' early experiences teach them not to show fear or weakness, to appear invulnerable. Little boys begin to learn this at a very young age. Learning to embody and display toughness, even if it is a veneer that covers quivering insecurity, can help boys stay safe in a hostile environment. In his eloquent description of street life for African American boys in poor communities, Geoffrey Canada describes how learning to fight, or at least displaying an attitude that one was ready and willing to fight, was necessary. Losing a fight, and "taking it like a man," was far better (and ultimately safer) than being labeled a coward.35 Learning early to mask one's vulnerability with a display of toughness may help boys survive on the street, but it can also hinder their emotional development. Even in an emotional straitjacket, boys and men retain a human need to connect with others, and for those who have some early athletic successes, sports can become the context for closeness with others.36

But as they move further into competitive athletic careers, men learn that they must be winners in order to continue to receive approval and respect. And to be a winner, you must be willing to suppress your empathy for other athletes. In the context of sports careers, you do not experience your body as a means of connecting intimately with others; rather, your body becomes a weapon, which you train to defeat a dehumanized opponent.37 It's a dog-eat-dog world out there; you gotta have that killer instinct.

Homophobic bullying of nonathlete boys is a common occurrence on high school and college campuses. A window was opened on this in 1999, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, armed to the teeth, entered Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado, and proceeded to kill thirteen and wound twenty-one of their schoolmates and teachers. "All jocks stand up," the killers yelled when they began their slaughter. "Anybody with a white
that or a shirt with a sports emblem on it is dead.” In the aftermath of this tragedy, public discussions sought the origins of the anger expressed by the two boys and asked how in the future to prevent others from violently going off. Very little discussion dealt with the ways such outsider boys are commonly targeted as nerds and symbolic pussies who serve as foils for athletes’ own in-group status. Indeed, Columbine High School was like many other high schools in this regard. There was a tough little group of about seven guys, mostly football players and wrestlers, who were known for painful, degrading hassle of younger male athletes, for harassing and physically abusing girls, for destroying property, and basically for getting away with it all. They also abused the outsider boys, one of whom was shoved into a locker by three football players who taunted, “Fag, what are you looking at?”

Homophobic taunting and bullying does not always result in such serious physical violence, but it is common. Homophobia plays a role within male peer groups that I compare to Elmer’s glue bonding two pieces of wood. Once the white glue is dried, it becomes clear, nearly invisible, and it acts simultaneously (and paradoxically) as a bond that holds the two pieces of wood together and as an invisible barrier, or shield, that keeps the pieces of wood from actually touching each other. Homophobia works the same way. While it bonds boys as part of the in-group (we are men, they are faggots), it also places clear limits on intimacy.

This is where alcohol often comes in. Although it is part of the system of competitive status enhancement to drink a lot of alcohol, young men also find that one of the short-term benefits of drinking with the guys is that it loosens constraints on verbal and emotional expression. The key desires underlying boys’ and men’s affiliations with each other—for acceptance, emotional connection, respect—seem more accessible after a few drinks. The constraints normally placed on expressions of physical closeness among men relax after a few drinks; the arms draped around a teammate’s shoulders and the words “I love you, man” can be forgotten in the fog of tomorrow’s hangover.

MALE ATHLETES’ VIOLENCE AGAINST THEMSELVES

In June 2000, future Hall of Fame quarterback Steve Young ended several months of speculation by announcing his retirement after fifteen years of professional football. He actually had played his last down ten months earlier, when a knock out hit by an opposing player caused his fourth concussion in three years. “I’ll miss so many things,” said Young, “What I won’t miss are the hits that made my body tingle.” Young’s announcement was not surprising. In fact, many had wondered why it took him so long to retire, given mounting evidence about the dangerous cumulative effects of head injuries. But Young’s desire to continue playing must be seen in the context of an entire career in which he was rewarded for taking tremendous risks on the football field, playing hurt and with reckless abandon.

Steve Young is not unusual in this respect. In November 2000, Denver Broncos quarterback Brian Griese suffered a shoulder separation in the first half of the game. Told by team doctors that he had a third-degree separation, the most severe type, he took a painkilling injection and returned to the game to lead his team to victory.

Football players live with the knowledge that minor and moderate injuries are an expected outcome of the game and that a serious career-ending or even life-threatening injury is always a possibility. Indeed, during the 1999 NFL season, 364 injuries were serious enough to cause a player to miss at least one game. Knee (122) and ankle injuries (52) were the most common, but 114 were concussions. In U.S. high schools, football players suffer by far the greatest number of fatal, disabling, and serious sports injuries (although the injury rates per 100,000 participants are higher in ice hockey and gymnastics). Among children, falls and sports-related injuries are the leading causes of hospital stays and emergency room visits. A survey of hospital emergency rooms and medical clinics in 1997 found a staggering number of sports injuries among U.S. children aged fourteen and under, led by bicycling (901,716), basketball (374,444), football (448,244), baseball (232,665), and soccer (227,157). In Canada, injuries—many of them head, neck, and cervical-spine injuries—among children ice hockey players are also escalating.6

THE BODY AS MACHINE

Several years ago, I was watching a football game on television with a friend. A big fan, he knew his team had to win this game to secure home-field advantage for the playoffs. Suddenly the announcer observed that a key player
on my friend’s team was hurt. The camera focused on the player, slowly walking off the field and looking at his hand in a puzzled way. His index finger, it turned out, was dislocated and sticking out sideways, at a ninety-degree angle. “Oh, good,” my friend sighed in relief. “It’s only his finger—he can still play.” Indeed, a few plays later, the man was back on the field with his hand taped up (presumably popped back into place by the trainer and perhaps injected with painkiller).

What struck me about this moment was how normal it seemed. Announcers, coaches, other players, and fans like my friend all fully expected this man to suck it up and keep on playing. We all have high expectations of football players’ (and other professional, college, and even high school athletes’) willingness and ability to play hurt, often risking their long-term health. Injuries and pain that in other contexts would result in emergency room visits, bed rest, and time off work or school are considered a normal part of the workday for many athletes.

A former major league baseball player described a series of injuries and rehabilitations that spanned not only the everyday aches and bruises one would expect a catcher to endure but also year after year of ankle, knee, shoulder, neck, and spinal injuries requiring several operations. Players routinely decide to play hurt, to “give their bodies up for the team” in this way, even with full knowledge that they are risking long-term disability. But when, in his early thirties, this man’s eleven-year pro baseball career finally came to an end, he described it as a shock. . . . I had felt that, the way I had conditioned myself and taken care of myself, that I would play until I was thirty-seven, thirty-eight.” To describe the way he had lived his life as taking care of himself seemed to me to express a particularly alienated relationship to his own body. Like many athletes, he had a wide range of knowledge about his body, but this self-knowledge was shallow; it was not an expansive sense of his body as a living organism, a self that connects in healthy ways with others and with the environment. Rather, it was an instrumental view of his body as a machine or tool to be built, disciplined, used (if necessary, used up) to get a job done.

This kind of self-knowledge—what psychologist William Pollack calls the “hardening of boys”—starts early in life, especially for athletes. Boys learn that to show pain and vulnerability risks their being seen as soft, and they know from the media, from coaches, and from their peers that this is a very bad thing. Instead, they learn that they can hope for high status, privilege, respect, and connection with others if they suppress their feelings and show they can take pain and risk injury. In the context of the athletic team, risking one’s health by playing hurt is more than a way to avoid misogynist or homophobic ridicule; it is also a way of performing a highly honored form of masculinity.

There are concrete rewards—status, prestige, public adulation, scholarships, and even money—for men who are willing to pay the price. But we must also remember that underlying men’s performances for each other is a powerful need to belong, to connect, to be respected. A player who refuses to play hurt, especially in a team sport, risks losing his tenuous but powerful connection with the male group. Given both the negative enforcement mechanisms and the positive rewards a player can expect from choosing to play hurt, it should surprise us more when a player decides not to risk his long-term health, refuses the needle, sits down and says “no más.”

PERFORMING THE TRIAD OF MEN’S VIOLENCE

The triad of men’s violence in sports—violence against women, against other men, and against their own bodies—is an explicable outcome of behavior and performance in male athletic groups. A small group of high-status males at the center of these groups sets the tone with misogynist and homophobic banter, teasing, and actions. Less central boys and men within the group, some of whom may feel uncomfortable with the group’s dominant values and actions, still tend to actively support or passively go along.

But how are these three kinds of violence connected? I’ve found two intertwined clusters of behavior that connect these three seemingly separate phenomena. The first is misogynist and homophobic talk and actions, through which boys and men learn two contradictory lessons about the group’s sexual aggression: It forms an exciting and pleasurable erotic bond that holds the group together (and places it above other groups), and it constantly threatens humiliation, ostracism, and even violence against a boy or man who fails to conform with the group values and practices.
The second is suppression of empathy. Through athletic peer groups, boys and men learn to suppress their empathy toward women and to make them objects of the group’s jokes and assaults. One’s own body becomes a sexual machine or a weapon for the conquest of a woman and for displaying hetero-sexual masculinity to male peers. Men also learn to suppress their empathy toward other men, both on and off the field, turning them into outsiders and enemies to be defeated by violence, if necessary. Again, one’s own body is experienced as a weapon to be used against an objectified opponent. Ultimately, the body-as-weapon turns back on the male athlete as an alien force: As he has learned to suppress his own self-empathy, to endure pain and injury to get the job done, his body is experienced not as a human self to be nurtured and cared for but as a machine or a tool to be used to get the job done.

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NOTES


7. Robinson, Crossing the Line.

8. This section of the essay is a substantially revised version of Michael A. Messner and Mark Stevens, “Scoring without Consent: Confronting Male Athletes’ Sexual Violence against Women,” in Scores for Youth and Sport, edited by Margaret Grus, Sandra Hall Bokemeyer, and Michael A. Messner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 231–240.


10. Lefkowitz, Our Guys, 25.

11. Lefkowitz’s descriptions of the assault are retrospective constructions, based in part on the victim’s descriptions and on subsequent bits of information that came out in the trial. Precise numbers of just how many boys in the basement participated physically in the assault and how many acted as a supportive audience are thus somewhat speculative.


15. Cynthia A. Habookum and Orphelia Harris, “Wrestling with Gender: Physicality and Masculinities among Inner-City First and Second Graders,” in Masculinities, Gender Relations, and Sport, edited by Jim McKay, Michael A. Messner, and Donald F. Sabo (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2000), 147–161. Habookum and Harris report this sort of verbal and physical aggression by higher-status boys toward lower-status boys taking place in their study of first graders.


21. As a result, the high school removed eight players from the nationally ranked lacrosse team and canceled the rest of the season. See Lynn Anderson and Len Satterfield, “St. Paul’s School Cancels Varsity Lacrosse Season,” Baltimore Sun, Apr 4, 2001.

all respond with violence. Boys’ responses to bullying vary, and this variance can be explained by boys’ being differently situated in family, school, and peer contexts. Messerschmidt, *Nine Lives.*

40. As Rocco L. Caprara puts it, “College men’s drinking appears to be profoundly paradoxical . . . [They drink] not only to enact male privilege but also to help them negotiate the emotional hazards of being a man in the contemporary American college.” Rocco L. Caprara, “Why College Men Drink: Alcohol, Adventure, and the Paradox of Masculinity,” *Journal of American College Health* 48, no. 6 (May 2000): 307–15.


47. Brian Pronger has written about sport as a disciplinary practice particular to modernity, through which men learn to close off their bodies to connection with others. Instead, the body is experienced as a means of overcoming others. Pronger, “Outta My Endzone.”


49. Don Sabo, “Pigskin, Patriarchy and Pain,” in Messner and Sabo, *Sex, Violence and Power in Sport,* 82–88. The pain principle in sport can also be seen as paradigmatic of (and indeed, a pedagogy for) a more general cultural view of men’s instrumental orientation to their own bodies. A few scholars have recently pointed to gender-related health patterns among men that help explain why, on average, men die seven years earlier than women do and have higher death rates from suicide, heart disease, accidents, and other major killers. Research points to the conclusion that these health risks among men are closely correlated with boys’ and men’s conformity to narrow conceptions of masculinity, including risk-taking, violence, and instrumental orientations to the body. For excellent general overviews, see Men’s Health and Illness: Gender, Power, and the Body, edited by Donald Sabo and David E. Gordon, (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1993), 121–191; and Will H. Courtney, “Constructions of Masculinity and Their Influence on Men’s Well-Being: A Theory of Gender and Health,” *Social Science and Medicine* 50 (2000): 239–246. Taking this observation to a different level, scholars have pointed out how different groups of men—broken down by social class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and so forth—have very different levels of vulnerability to certain diseases and dangers. See, for instance, Robert Staples, “Health Among African American Males,” in Sabo and Gordon, *Men, Health and Illness.*

50. The “no mas” reference is to the famous 1980 welterweight championship fight between Roberto Duran and Sugar Ray Leonard. Feeling that he was losing the fight, Duran refused to return to the ring for a new round, saying, “No mas (no more).” He was roundly criticized for quitting instead of continuing the fight until he was knocked out. I examined this idea that boxers must
fight until the very end in Michael A. Messner, "Why Rocky III?” in Messner and Sabo, Sex, Violence and Power in Sports.

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RAPE, COLOR, AND GLOBAL FEMINISM
A CONVERGING CONSCIOUSNESS
SUN YUNG SHIN

The subject of rape was not polite dinner conversation. It made people uncomfortable, and yet I wanted to understand how it operated in our society to keep all women hostage.