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**Sexual Assault on College Campuses:  
The Links Between Hegemonic Masculinity, College Sports, and Sexual Violence**

Vanessa Irogbulem

Religion 323: Sexual Ethics

Dr. Wolff

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One in five women are sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime. National efforts to address, mitigate, and prevent sexual assaults at institutions of higher education have increased rapidly resulting in the leveraging of policies such as Title IX. Too often society has inexplicitly delegated the responsibility of addressing and bringing awareness to the issue of sexual violence onto the survivors themselves. While it is important that we facilitate conversations surrounding sexual violence both on and off-campus, many of these anti-violence campaigns typically remain only on a rhetorical level that emphasizes ending “rape culture” as the solution to the problem. Although rape culture does play a large role in the perpetuation of sexual violence on college campuses, it is important to explore different avenues of systematic societal functions that influence the actions of the individuals who are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of sexual violence—men. In this paper I will explore the social and neurobiological factors that shape men into sexual aggressors by rewarding violent behaviors. Rather than villainizing individual men, I will critique the exploitation and commodification of male bodies through sports, namely football. The pressure for young men to engage in violent sports takes a toll on their bodies physically, specifically their nervous system. I propose that society’s focus on physically violent and aggressive sports plays a significant role in the increase of sexual violence.

It has become evident that a disproportionate number of sexual assaults on campuses are committed by college athletes.<sup>1</sup> There have been over 175 cases of sexual assaults committed by NFL players since 2000,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that it is worth investigating whether traumatic brain

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<sup>1</sup> Young, Belinda-Rose, Sarah L. Desmarais, Julie A. Baldwin, and Rasheeta Chandler. "Sexual Coercion Practices Among Undergraduate Male Recreational Athletes, Intercollegiate Athletes, and Non-Athletes." *Violence Against Women* 23, no. 7 (05, 2016): 795-812. doi:10.1177/1077801216651339.

<sup>2</sup> "NFL Arrest-Database - NFL Football." USA Today. Accessed February 09, 2019. <https://www.usatoday.com/sports/nfl/arrests/>.

injuries (TBIs) might be linked to sexual violence and aggression. While it is reasonable to associate this link to sports culture rewarding aggression in men as well as asserting dominance over women, recent studies have begun to investigate the effects of TBIs in athletes and its connection to increased levels of violence, impulsivity, and aggression. One study examined the effects of concussions on the frontotemporal cortical network of the brain. This area of the brain has been associated with behaviors such as impulsivity and aggression. In addition, the uncinate fasciculus (UF) that connects the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) with the anterior temporal lobe (ATL) is a crucial determinant of behavioral regulation. The findings of this study revealed that there are structural and functional abnormalities in the frontotemporal cortical network, which include the UF, in athletes with a history of multiple concussions.<sup>3</sup> These same athletes showed behavioral signs of impulsivity as well as increased aggression and mania. The impulsive and aggressive behaviors described in the study above are exhibited in a majority of sexual assault cases in which the perpetrators are student athletes. This behavior often continues as they go on to play professionally.<sup>4</sup> One in three NFL players are expected to suffer from TBIs.<sup>5</sup> This neurobiological evidence further supports the claim that athletes who suffer from TBIs are more likely to engage in impulsive and aggressive behavior.

It is vital to examine society's problematic view of masculinity that encourages young boys to participate in violent sports. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant view of what masculinity should look like within a society. This type of masculinity praises and positively

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<sup>3</sup> Goswami, R., P. Dufort, M. C. Tartaglia, R. E. Green, A. Crawley, C. H. Tator, R. Wennberg, D. J. Mikulis, M. Keightley, and Karen D. Davis. "Frontotemporal Correlates of Impulsivity and Machine Learning in Retired Professional Athletes with a History of Multiple Concussions." *Brain Structure and Function* 221, no. 4 (02, 2015): 1911-925. doi:10.1007/s00429-015-1012-0.

<sup>4</sup> Levy, Donald P. 'Hegemonic Masculinity.' In *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*, 253-55. Edited by Michael Flood, Judith Kegan Gardiner, Bob Pease, and Keith Pringle. London: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Schrupp, Lindsay. "Can Concussions Lead to Rape?" *Broadly*. December 17, 2015. Accessed February 09, 2019. [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/ae5mja/can-concussions-lead-to-rape](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/ae5mja/can-concussions-lead-to-rape).

reinforces characteristics like physical strength, competitiveness, expressing dominance, violence, and aggression. Sports are sometimes regarded as “masculine” territory and are a crucial part of society where hegemonic masculinity is constructed and reproduced. Some of the most popular sports seem to be the ones that directly celebrate the aforementioned valued skills and sanction the use of extreme force. Typically, society guides young boys who are the most complicit candidates in performing hegemonic masculinity and leads them down a path geared towards sports-related activities. The young boys who decide to continue down this path quickly realize that athletic competition entails more than merely just winning or losing. Athletic success comes with family and peer recognition, acceptance by society, and future monetary achievements. Ultimately, society’s emphasis on athletic success greatly influences young boys as they go from elementary level sports to college athletics.

Student athletes are one of the most under-researched exploited populations on college campuses. Many student athletes are enticed by athletic scholarships that sometimes do not always cover the cost of attending college, which forces them beneath the poverty line. Even when athletic scholarships are full ride, they are sometimes held over the heads of athletes by the institution and coaches who may threaten to pull scholarships of players who fail to perform at a satisfactory level. Consequently, this pressure to perform at their best force student athletes to overextend themselves, or risk being dropped from the team. Since American society praises athletic success, even more so on a collegiate level, people often overlook the conditions in which student athletes must endure for various reasons. The biggest reason is the amount of revenue that come from the endorsements that athletes receive.

Emilie Townes, author of *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, discusses how normalizing the reinforcement of stereotypes allow for the commodification of individuals’

identities.<sup>6</sup> In her book she investigates how the production of “Aunt Jemima,” a historic southern black symbol, like the Mammy image, reinforces the treatment of black identity as property. She argues that while black identity, black culture, and black bodies have been transformed into a material form of property that is marketed solely for the acquisition of wealth and privilege, black bodies are not the only victims of this problem. In this, we can see parallels between what Townes argues and the marketing of student athletes’ identities to profit from their talent and labor. The sports industry is one of the principal sources of Division I and Division II colleges’ revenue. To put in perspective, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reached a historic high pulling in more than \$1 billion in revenue during the 2016-17 academic school year, with the average school generating around \$31.9 million in football revenue each year.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, according to a survey conducted by the NCAA, playing football requires 43.3 hours a week, while the average athletic scholarship for DI and DII athletics sits at about \$11,000.<sup>8</sup> Although many student athletes may play on an athletic scholarship, the revenue that colleges earn because of these athletes is not nearly as close to the amount athletes receives through their scholarships. This becomes problematic in the fact that institutions of higher education are using young athletes for profit but are not properly compensating them for their labor. Derek Van Rheenen, a professor of Cultural Studies of Sports in Education, notes that “commodification occurs whether human labor is transformed into a material product, such as a

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<sup>6</sup> Townes, Emilie Maureen. “Vanishing into Limbo: The Moral Dilemma of Identity as Property and Commodity.” In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 29-55. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Gaines, Cork. “The Average College Football Team Makes More Money than the next 35 College Sports Combined.” *Business Insider*. October 05, 2017. Accessed February 09, 2019.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/college-sports-football-revenue-2017-10>; Rovell, Darren. “NCAA Tops \$1 Billion in Revenue during 2016-17 School Year.” *ESPN*. March 07, 2018. Accessed February 20, 2019.

[http://www.espn.com/college-sports/story/\\_/id/22678988/ncaa-tops-1-billion-revenue-first](http://www.espn.com/college-sports/story/_/id/22678988/ncaa-tops-1-billion-revenue-first).

<sup>8</sup> O’Shaughnessy, Lynn. “8 Things You Should Know about Sports Scholarships.” *CBS News*. September 20, 2012. Accessed February 20, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/8-things-you-should-know-about-sports-scholarships/>.

pair of shoes, or reified as athletic production.”<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, the pressure riding on the success of college athletes causes these young men to feel obligated to do whatever it takes to win or succeed regardless of the physical, mental, and emotional toll sports take on them.

Although colleges profit immensely from student athletes, one would think that these institutions would invest large sums of money to ensure the safety of their star players. However, it is estimated that 1.7 to 3 million sports and recreation-related concussions happen each year with around 300,000 of those being football related, and as many as 50% of those concussions going unreported.<sup>10</sup> While this alone should be cause for concern, the notion that the severe effects of these TBIs can be linked to sexual violence is shocking. This is where the connection between something as seemingly trivial as college sports and sexual violence come into play.

When we look at the overwhelming number of sexual assaults that occur not only on college campuses, but in society in general, and how a significant number of them are perpetrated by athletes, it would be irresponsible not to question whether these two factors are connected. Society has created a systematically imbalanced structure whose toxic definition of masculinity permeates through social culture and influences what types of behaviors or actions are praised and rewarded or punished. These praised behaviors lead a large majority of the male population to participate in activities that society deems masculine, such as sports like football. When one continues to look at the behavior of college and professional level athletes, it crucial that we acknowledge that young male athletes often base their self-image and masculine identity around the success-derived appreciation from others. This leaves them vulnerable to being

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<sup>9</sup> Rheenen, Derek Van. "Exploitation in College Sports: Race, Revenue, and Educational Reward." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 48, no. 5 (07, 2012): 550-71. doi:10.1177/1012690212450218.

<sup>10</sup> "Concussion Statistics and Facts" UPMC. Accessed February 09, 2019. <https://www.upmc.com/services/sports-medicine/services/concussion/facts-statistics>.

exploited and commodified by a system that encourages these behaviors in men from an extremely young age. Institutions of higher education then endorse these athletes because they profit immensely from them, thus allowing for the continuation of physically violent and aggressive behaviors to be carried out through sports and labeled as a form of entertainment.

Sexual violence poses a great challenge to college campuses. This silent epidemic that continues to plague universities nationwide have forced both school administrative and federal officials to take action. These actions, while extremely beneficial, do not always target the fundamental root causes that lead to sexual violence. The conversations we are having about rape culture often fail to acknowledge and facilitate discussions about systematic societal issues that could be part of the solution to the problem. The construction of hypermasculinity in a society that pulls young boys toward physically aggressive and violent sports clearly play a larger role than we think in the rates of sexual violence. With 10% of all college football players sustaining brain injuries, significant evidence shows a positive correlation between TBIs and violence.<sup>11</sup> It is entirely plausible that these violent sports play a role in the issue of sexual violence. Since violent sports are a prominent activity among males, it is time to start a new conversation surrounding the way society emphasizes the performance of hegemonic masculinity in young boys. These ideas are being carried with them as they grow up, and they continue to influence what types of behaviors are deemed acceptable for them to engage in. Violence and aggression are encouraged especially in sports which give young men a way to acceptably participate in these behaviors. However, not only do these sports endanger young men, but the injuries they sustain often increase the likelihood of these athletes to engage in sexual violence. Furthermore,

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<sup>11</sup> “What Is a Concussion?” Brain Injury Research Institute. [protectthebrain.org](http://www.protectthebrain.org). Accessed February 09, 2019. <http://www.protectthebrain.org/Brain-Injury-Research/What-is-a-Concussion-.aspx>.



the solution should not focus entirely on federal mandates, but it should also include plans to reprogram the paths society deems “acceptable” for boys in order to be recognized as masculine.

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