

Sport, athletes, and violence against women

Michael Flood and Sue Dyson

Allegations of sexual assault and harassment by rugby league and Australian Football League (AFL) players in 2004 and 2005 put the link between sport and violence against women firmly on the public agenda. There was widespread media coverage of the allegations and substantial community debate. In response to these allegations and the issues surrounding them, both rugby league and AFL codes initiated education programs among their players.

In recent months, there have been further controversies over sexual assaults, domestic violence, drug abuse, and other forms of anti-social behaviour by professional sportsmen. These have fuelled community perceptions that some sporting codes involve sexist subcultures in which 'boys behaving badly' is normal, if not celebrated. So, what do we actually know about the links between sport and violence against women?

In this article, we review the evidence on athletes' involvement in violence against women, their agreement with violence-supportive attitudes, and the risk factors for violence associated with sport in particular. This review is excerpted from a longer report written for the AFL by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University. The longer report involves a literature review, an assessment of best practice in education, and recommendations for future violence prevention efforts.

ARE MALE ATHLETES MORE DANGEROUS THAN OTHER MEN?

Early research suggested that male athletes have a greater propensity for violence against women than other men. A considerable amount has been written in the USA and Canada about the propensity for violence among men who participate in contact and team sports (see for example Chandler, Dewaynes and Carroll 1999; Craig 2000; Safai 2002; Smith and Stewart

2003). An early American study found that on college campuses, male athletes were over-represented by a factor of ten among the men who commit acts of sexual assault and domestic violence. Frintner and Rubinson (1993) found that while sports team members make up less than 2 per cent of the campus population, they comprise 20.2 per cent of the men involved in sexual assault or attempted sexual assault. The US National Institute of Mental health reported, from a survey in 1990, that athletes participated in approximately one third of 862 sexual assaults on college campuses (Eskenazi 1990). Another study of 1,050 athletes and more than 10,000 students at a college campus reported that athletes were 5.5 times more likely to admit to behaviour that could be defined as rape (Melnick 1992). A more recent study found that male athletes report significantly greater agreement with rape-supportive statements than men in general (Boeringer 1999).

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However, contemporary research complicates such apparently simple associations between men's participation in sport and their use of or agreement with violence against women, and it has begun to identify more precisely the factors associated with violence-supportive norms and behaviours. Research on sport and violence against women has moved from early generalisations to increasingly sophisticated accounts of the precise risk factors that shape physical and sexual assault by male athletes. The research suggests that the likelihood of involvement in violence is unevenly spread across sports; it may vary even within a particular sport, and local and contextual factors can be influential.

In a recent American study among 704 male and female university athletes, rape myth acceptance was highest among male athletes, especially younger athletes and those playing a team-based sport (football or basketball) rather than an individual sport (such as tennis, golf, swimming, or track and field) (Sawyer et al. 2002). In another study among 139 male college students, fraternity membership, conservative attitudes towards women, and viewing contact sports were significant predictors of sexual aggression against women (Brown et al. 2002). Oddly, men with lower levels of participation in (rather

than spectatorship of) contact sports had higher levels of sexual aggression. The authors speculate that individuals' levels of trait aggression may mediate the relationship between exposure to aggressive incidents and subsequent acts of aggression – in other words, that being exposed to aggressive incidents only results in aggressive behaviour if the individual already has an aggressive personality (Brown et al. 2002: 948).

Humphrey and Kahn (2000) document that some fraternities and athletic teams involve much higher risks of sexual assault than others. In fraternities and teams perceived by other university students to have 'party' atmospheres conducive to sexual offences, members showed higher levels of sexual aggression towards women, hostility towards women, and male peer support for sexual violence, than members of perceived low-risk groups.

Male athletes' violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours, like those in any segment of the population, are likely to have multiple and interconnecting causes. Most generally, they may reflect wider associations between men, masculinity, gender norms, and tolerance for violence. Australian and international research has documented that men are more likely than women to express violence-supportive attitudes, and that it is gender role orientation rather than gender per se that shapes men's and women's attitudes (Flood and Pease 2006). Individuals with more traditional or conservative attitudes towards gender and sexuality are also more likely to condone domestic violence and sexual assault.

When rugby league or AFL players sexually harass women in pubs, pressure women into sex in hotel rooms, or make obscene phone calls, in one sense, they are acting just like thousands of other young men around the country. Young women everywhere know that this behaviour is not confined to professional athletes. For example, being groped or harassed is a common element of young women's experience of clubs, pubs, and other public places.

One in seven women aged 18 to 24, or thirteen per cent, report unwanted sexual touching in the last 12 months, according to a national survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996). In the past year alone, over a third of young women received inappropriate comments about their body or sex life by a man. One in six males aged 12 to 20 agrees with the statement that 'it's OK for a boy to make a girl have sex with him if she has flirted with him or led him on', according to a 2001 survey of 5,000 young people in Australia (National Crime Prevention 2001). Most men, including most professional sportsmen, treat women with respect, yet far too many men have stood by silently while a minority continue to treat women with contempt.

While violence against women is hardly the monopoly of professional male

athletes, there are features of some sporting sub-cultures which may make them particularly dangerous for women. To begin with, to the extent that some sporting sub-cultures (especially those associated with team-based contact sports) involve more sexist and conservative norms for gender and sexuality, they may also involve more violence-supportive attitudes. Sexist peer norms and cultures are a key risk factor for men's perpetration of sexual violence.

This is clear from studies among university fraternities and military institutions, and the insights from these studies are also likely to be applicable in sporting contexts as well. For example, on American campus cultures with high rates of sexual violence, some of the socio-cultural correlates (especially among college fraternities) include greater gender segregation, an ethic of male sexual conquest and 'getting sex', displays of masculinity through heterosexual sexual performance, high alcohol consumption, heterosexism and homophobia, use of pornography, and general norms of women's subordinate status (Boswell and Spade 1996; Sanday 1996). In military contexts, norms of gender inequality and other bonds that foster and justify abuse in particular peer cultures are documented to promote violence against women (Rosen et al. 2003; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997). For example, Rosen et al. (2003) found an association between 'group disrespect' (the presence of rude and aggressive behaviour, pornography consumption, sexualised discussion, and encouragement of group drinking) and the perpetration of intimate partner violence, at both individual and group levels. Cultures of sexism have been documented in particular sports overseas, including ice hockey (Robinson 1998; West 1996) and rugby (Schacht 1996), and some Australian sporting cultures may be similar.

OTHER RISK FACTORS IN SPORT

There are further factors specific to or concentrated in professional sport which have been hypothesised to increase male players' risks of perpetrating sexual assault. These risk factors include:

- **Male bonding:** The codes of mateship and loyalty in tightly knit male groups in some sports, although valuable for teamwork, may both intensify sexism and encourage individuals to allow group loyalties to override their personal integrity.
- **Aggressive sport:** Contact sports themselves have been seen as implicated in men's violence against women, in that they teach athletes physical aggression and dominance, extreme competitiveness, physical toughness and insensitivity to others' pain and they naturalise and glorify violence.
- **Sexualisation and subordination of women:** Some critics point to women's

roles in sports, either as sexualised props for men's performance (as cheerleaders), or as supporters and carers, as implicated in sexist norms.

- Celebrity status and entitlement: The high-profile status and celebrity treatment of professional athletes has been seen potentially to feed a sense of entitlement and lack of accountability for one's actions off the field.
- Drug abuse: Athletes' excessive consumption of drugs, particularly alcohol, has been identified as a potential risk factor for sexual assault.
- 'Groupie' culture: Players' sexual involvement with women seen to seek out the sexual company of professional athletes, combined with athletes' status and entitlement, may shape athletes' assumptions about women, sexuality, and consent (Benedict 1998; Melnick 1992).

Context-specific mechanisms further shape the prevalence of violence-supportive attitudes and violent behaviour among male athletes in some sporting contexts. One is *group socialisation*: in joining particular sporting teams, men are actively inducted into the existing norms and values of these contexts. Another is *identification*. Membership of a high-risk group may itself not be sufficient to increase one's adherence to violence-supportive beliefs or one's likelihood of violent behaviour, and members may also have to identify with the group and see it as a reference group (Humphrey and Kahn 2000: 1320). Another mechanism is *self-selection*: men with pre-existing violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours and an orientation towards other features of these contexts such as heavy drinking may join groups with similar norms.

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Participation in professional sports may also have an impact on the legal ramifications of men's use of violence against women. There is some American evidence, at least from newspaper reports, that professional athletes are more likely than other men to be charged with a crime, but also more likely to be acquitted. Benedict (2003) writes that once a formal complaint has been made, professional and college athletes are more likely than members of the general population to be charged with a crime. But their conviction rates are lower than those of other defendants. A report in *USA Today* (22 December 2003) notes that athletes charged with sexual assault are convicted at a much

lower rate than other men. It suggests that influential factors include pressure on the victim, for example not to 'ruin the man's career', jurors' sympathy to athletes and athletes' popularity, and athletes' wealth and thus their ability to hire more experienced lawyers.

AUSTRALIAN DATA

While we have identified a range of factors which may shape male athletes' attitudes and behaviours, we stress that there is no Australian evidence that male sports players have more violence-supportive attitudes or a greater likelihood of perpetrating violence than any other men.

Violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours among athletes in Australia have been the subject of two research projects, although the details are yet to be published in academic journals. It is understood that Australia's National Rugby League's violence prevention project (2004–2005) included a significant research component, but no published material on this study was available at the time of this review. The second study compared hostility towards women among athletes in contact and non-contact sports, and reported that there were no significant differences between the two groups in relation to sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviour (Coutts et al. 2005).

There is also relevant Australian scholarship in a more general study of 'gender appropriate behaviours' (Robins 2005) among sporting team members. Robins' study with AFL players reported that, on average, their attitudes were no different from other samples of males. However a wide variety of attitudes were found, from dominant masculine attitudes, where manliness was measured by sexual success, to completely non-dominant attitudes. Robins (2005) reported that AFL players who were involved in activities outside of football, particularly education, were more likely to have more positive attitudes towards women and be open to other social norms and standards than those with no outside activities.

Five factors were found to be important in determining who players chose to socialise with after hours: experience, playing ability, masculine attitudes, small groups or cliques, and mutual social relations. In some clubs women were reported to be popular in after-hours social networks. Robins (2005) also reported that the best players were not always well integrated into after-hours networks.

There is no Australian data pointing to particular sporting codes, cultures, or clubs as at higher risk for the perpetration of violence against women. Nevertheless, it is also clear that some Australian sporting cultures or sub-cultures share the sexist peer norms and other characteristics which may

make them particularly dangerous for women. These contexts therefore are important sites for violence prevention.

VIOLENCE PREVENTION AMONG ATHLETES

We conclude with some brief comments on violence prevention education among athletes. We focus on male athletes, given that most incidents of violence against women are perpetrated by men and the vast majority of professional athletes, at least in team sporting codes, are male.

Internationally, the field of sexual assault prevention includes a wide variety of educational interventions with boys and men, including those that address constructions of masculinity and socialisation, capacity for victim empathy, understanding of consent, and belief in rape myths. In Australia, nearly all interventions with males regarding violence prevention are delivered to boys and young men in schools, and there are few educational programs addressing adult men. In assessing the most effective forms of violence prevention education, one difficulty is that we often do not know what has worked or not worked in existing violence prevention education. Most interventions have not been evaluated, and many existing evaluations are poorly designed. At the same time, it is possible to outline the features of effective educational interventions for preventing violence against women, drawing both on existing evaluations and on scholarship and experience grounded in related fields such as adult education. Recent reviews have argued that effective violence prevention programs among men have certain key features (Berkowitz 2004a, 2004b; Flood 2005-2006). Effective programs:

- Are comprehensive, in that they address and involve all relevant community members and systems.
- Are intensive, in that they offer learning opportunities that are interactive, involve active participation, are sustained over time and have multiple points of contact with reinforcing messages.
- Address cognitive, affective, and behavioural domains: what people know, how they feel, and how they behave.
- Are relevant to the audience. They are tailored to the characteristics of the participants and acknowledge the special needs and concerns of particular communities. They focus on peer-related variables, use peers in leadership roles, and emphasize the relationship of sexual assault to other issues.
- Offer positive messages which build on men's values and predisposition to act in a positive manner.

In the longer report, from which this discussion is taken, we explore several models for the delivery of education to athletes, address issues such as

the use of peers or professional educators as program facilitators, and make recommendations for future efforts.

The issue of violent, coercive, and harassing behaviour by professional male athletes in Australia is unlikely to go away. It is heartening to see that the organisations that manage two of Australia's major sporting codes have taken major steps to address violence against women. There is much work to be done, and it must be based on both sound research on the cultures and contexts of sport and effective strategies of intervention and prevention.

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