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Q: Is Violence on the Playing Field A Male Issue?

A: The environment we create for our children and student-athletes is the result of a complex interplay of numerous social contexts and interactions. The print and electronic media, major sporting events and, in general, the cultural institution of sport, play a major role in the fabric of the lives of American youth. Any cultural institution that invites or celebrates male aggression and violence contributes to the problem. Professional sport in our society does that. Male violent behavior is not only often unquestioned, it is often celebrated in sport (as it is in war) as heroic and exciting. It is time for those of us in the business of sport to examine how we contribute to the problem and how we might change our course. Violence on the playing field is an athletic director or sport leader issue. In the end, it will take all of us working together on multiple fronts to reduce the tragedy of male violence in our culture.

A momentary regression for those who might get defensive at the use of the term “male violent behavior” and the notion that this is a male problem. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reports, of those arrested for violent crimes in our society, over 85% are males. Yes, women are capable of violence and we are seeing increased incidents of violent female behavior in sport. However, our culture grooms males for this role. It is still unacceptable to train or encourage women to practice violence and aggression. The intent of this terminology not to make males uncomfortable. Rather, we must simply recognize that no solution is possible without a definition of the problem. Violence in our society is a predominantly male problem and accepted and celebrated violence in male professional sports, heavily promoted by the media, is a root reality.

The male athlete represents the ideal of masculinity in our culture. Even if a male does not enter the locker room or playing field as a participant, he is groomed as a spectator. When we embrace the clear-cut efforts to maim in boxing, applaud the instant replays of physical assault legitimized by the rules of football, cheer the hockey fist fight or a bench clearing baseball brawl or simply view the throwing of elbows in the basketball as part of the game, the acceptance and celebration of such behavior creates a moral dichotomy. It is okay on the playing field but not on the streets. How far removed is such behavior from fan violence during or after sports contests?

Why do coaches use “sissy”, “pussy”, “fag” or female or homosexual denigrating terms to intimidate those who don’t measure up to performance expectations? Where did these athletes learn this behavior?

To do violence to others, we need to dehumanize them. A general needs to define Nazis or Serbs as animals. A coach needs to define opponents as the enemy. Women and homosexuals need to be denigrated for sexual assault and hate crimes to flourish. To what extent do we do this in the male locker room? Answer: plenty. Does the soft porn of the SI swimsuit issue contribute to the objectification of women? How do all of these pieces relate?

So, you read this and are saying to yourself, “This is a deep cultural problem. How am I, a person in the business of sport, able to change the rules of sport or the nature of the male locker room? Doesn’t football require violent guys? Hey, I’m making money off this celebration of violence and money is the bottom line in our culture, isn’t it? Is this woman against football?” Such responses are both simplistic and extreme. There are plenty of coaches and lots of good folks in the sports industry who don’t contribute to the problem. They know the difference between a good hard block and telling a player to intentionally injure a player to eliminate him from the game. They do not allow players and employees to denigrate or harass women. They do not permit the use of the term faggot or the harassment of homosexuals. There are some that are creating the right kind of environment for our children – and ourselves. Only pressure from good guys has a chance of changing the behavior of those who support male violence. Athletics directors and youth sport leaders need to be the good guys. It’s our issue.

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