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Manhood and Football

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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ESPN, the Worldwide Breeder of ludicrous sports programming, reached a new low this week. The Network that brought you the biggest non-event on the annual sports calendar, the NFL draft, and then took it down another notch by televising the announcement of the NFL schedule, outdid itself once again by having a countdown to the unveiling of Mel Kiper's mock draft. Did anyone care? Is Mel anything more than a parody of himself? Has ESPN totally lost its way? (The correct answers are no, no, and maybe.)

Despite this deep slide into the abyss, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network does produce reporting of quality. Its considerable coverage of the emerging controversy surrounding head trauma, discounting its pullout from the joint production of "League of Denial" with PBS, remains impressive. "Outside the Lines" is an excellent forum of reporting on serious issues, and the "30 for 30" documentary series has spawned a number of high quality productions.

This past week "Outside the Lines" reported on "Texas Youth Football" and on the NFL's "Heads Up" program as part of ESPN's continuing reporting on concussions and concussion related issues. The more I see of these reports or read about football and concussions the more I am moving to the conclusion that the wrong subject is being discussed.

The real topic of this ongoing discussion and debate should not be concussions or football, but at a deeper level, the social definitions of what it means to be a man, and by implication gender, and their relationship to sport.

Invariably reports on head trauma in football lead to comments on football as a means to turn boys into men, or to prepare young boys for the real world. What is meant by these comments? What does it mean "to be a man?" Does it mean a willingness to inflict pain on a fellow human being? Does it mean being willing to accept pain from fellow human beings? Does it mean physically intimidating others by aggressive or violent actions?

If we define manhood in these sorts of physical terms then indeed football is good preparation for life as a man. So

are any other heavy duty contact sports that require the endurance of pain while maintaining a certain level of performance. One might even argue that most forms of sadomasochism would also be excellent means of creating men.

The footage from Texas Youth football and the discussion that followed with a league organizer and a league mother were clear on this. The point of football was in part to transform boys into men by putting them through physical pain. Video of six, seven and eight year old boys vomiting, crying, but persevering, made it clear what constituted one of the most valuable lessons of this game. There was a lip service to safety but it was clear that it was a secondary concern.

Attempts to make the game of football safer, particularly in reference to concussions, are seen by some social critics as proof of a feminization of the culture. The attempts to change tackling rules in football or to protect the quarterback are derided by some, including defensive players, as proof of a growing "softness" in the game, a softness that some see mirrored in society.

There is within this discussion a growing concern over the feminization of the culture, an interesting echo from the late 19th century. Coming out of the Civil War and with no new wars to fight there were concerns about growing "softness" in the society. The rise of city and transformation of work from physical to sedentary mental endeavors produced further concerns about the how young boys could be molded into young men. In addition there was a sense that physical bravery was an important element of both moral strength and leadership.

It was at this point that football was introduced to young American men, and that it became a significant part of the life of the college and university. When college presidents argued for the inclusion of football in the extra-curriculum of the college, they did so in terms of preparation of young men for leadership and for building manly character. Essential in this was the physical challenge inherent in the game. For those searching for "a moral equivalent to war," advocates of intercollegiate football believed they had found it.

Football spoke very directly to those concerned about the feminization of the culture in the late 19th century, as it speaks now to the same concerns in the early 21st century. Football builds leaders and builds men. So it was said in the late 19th century, and so too in the early 21st century where leaders are still frequently defined as men although no longer exclusively as white men.

In our world where the military draft has vanished and a very small portion of the population has military experience, men are only infrequently built in war. In addition as our culture becomes increasingly tied to electronic gadgetry and the young spend more time playing video games than in outdoor activities, these concerns about softness have resurfaced. The alarms are sounding and football remains at the ready to serve. It still promises to build men.

So we need to ask ourselves is there another definition of manhood, one that might be a definition of humanity or person-hood. Is it possible to set aside aggression, intimidation, and physicality, and replace them with human values that define strength and leadership in terms of character, intellectual ability, emotional maturity, and service? These would be values that ignore gender. They would be values that build humans and not just men.

Until our definition of what constitutes a man is replaced by a definition of what constitutes a human, any discussion of the value of football and its place in our society is going nowhere. The traditional definitions of manhood and football are a near perfect fit, and we are in dire need of new definitions beyond manhood.

Or perhaps we need to look further into the past, to the Ancient Greeks. Maybe the answer is to build a sound mind, in a sound body, regardless of gender.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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