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Sports News Puts Focus on Society's Problems

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Sports News Puts Focus on Society's Problems

By Richard Lapchick
UCF Forum columnist
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Recent sports news has been filled with terrible stories about racism, gender violence, child abuse, and concussion-related brain damage for one in three former NFL players.

With all the bad news, it is a time when we could all be depressed and anxious. But even these bad stories have helped the public focus on the broader societal problems.

Since September 2006 – when Roger Goodell became the NFL commissioner – law enforcement authorities have pursued 50 domestic-violence cases against NFL players, including one for murder and at least five allegations of assaulting or choking pregnant women. That means in that nine-year period there have been an average of 5+ cases per year.

In that same period, nationally there have been an estimated 11.7 million cases of women and girls being battered and more than 8 million raped.

To keep the bigger societal news about domestic violence in the public eye beyond the news cycle, professional sports can play a big role — and the National Consortium for Academics in Sport, which I founded in 1985, aims to help in the years ahead.

The mission of the NCAS, which has been based at the University of Central Florida since 2001, is to use the power of sport to effect positive social change. We educate and empower individuals and organizations by inspiring values-based thinking leading to actions that promote social responsibility and equality. The NCAS has a rich history of tackling society's more difficult issues and has more than 290 colleges and universities as members.

More than NFL player Adrian Peterson's charges of child abuse, the Penn State case of assistant coach Jerry Sandusky forced America to realize that there is a report of child

abuse made every 10 seconds and only one in 10 is reported. But you can see what I mean by the news cycle: Child abuse was in our consciousness for a while after the Penn State story broke but the attention had diminished until the Peterson charges were made.

Where will the news cycle take us this time?

We started the NCAS in response to the then-plummeting graduation rates of student-athletes in the revenue sports. While there were no scientific studies in 1985, it was estimated that 27 percent of male basketball student-athletes and 33 percent of football student-athletes graduated. A shocking 20 percent of African-American student-athletes in those sports graduated.

It was against NCAA rules for a school to give financial support beyond the fifth year of enrollment. We made the extension of that aid until the completion of a degree as half of the basis of our launch in 1985. Since that time, more than 33,000 former student-athletes have returned to complete their degrees.

We started the NCAS in an era when no virtually no student-athletes were doing community service; we made that the other half of the basis of our launch. Our returning athletes have worked with more than 19 million youth and have donated more than 22 million hours of service. We recognized that no one can reach young people more effectively than student-athletes.

We have been working with youth on issues of racism, sexism, homophobia and gender-violence preventions for almost 30 years. We are proud that others have recognized the value of service and run their own programs for student-athletes.

When we started, female student-athletes had excellent graduation rates but they had fewer opportunities as athletic departments were dragging their feet on implementing Title IX. It is better now but far from perfect. Title IX is the 1972 law that protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance.

In 1985, people running our athletic departments all looked like me – white men – as most women and people of color were shut out of top administrative posts. Twenty-nine years later, little has changed in this regard as more than 90 percent of our athletics directors are white.

The NCAS consortium was formed in response to ethical and moral lapses in sport and society.

In the age of Donald Sterling, the former NBA team owner banned for racist behavior, the NCAS has been doing diversity and inclusion training for 25 years. Our Teamwork Leadership Institute has trained the NBA, NASCAR, MLS, many teams and more than 200 college athletics departments.

Before the attention on former NFL player Ray Rice and the charges he assaulted his then-fiancee, we started the first gender-violence prevention program in sport 22 years ago. We have trained pro teams, NASCAR, more than 200 college athletics departments and all four branches of the U.S. military worldwide.

In an age when it seems hard to decide how to penalize a player guilty of gender violence, in 1996 the NCAS passed a resolution calling for a one-year ban after a first offense, allowing for reinstatement after going through a rigorous process, and then a lifetime ban if there were a second offense.

I also am proud to announce that the NCAS launched its Shut Out Trafficking program on Oct. 6 at LaSalle University with a week of activities using student-athletes, coaches and administrators to increase campus awareness on human trafficking. We will also do a week of activities on nine other NCAS campuses over the course of 2014-15.

Appropriately, Shut Out Trafficking will conclude the fall semester with a week at UCF, starting with a forum Monday, Nov. 10, and ending with activities at the football, women's basketball and volleyball games on Friday, Nov. 14.

Richard E. Lapchick is the director of The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida, which annually publishes racial and gender report cards on MLB, the NBA, WNBA, NFL, MLS, college sports, and the Associated Press Sports Editors. He also is the author of 16 books that primarily focus on racial and gender issues and ethics in college sport. He can be followed on Twitter @richardlapchick and on facebook.com/richard.lapchick. He can be reached at rlapchick@ucf.edu