

Bullying

11-10-2013

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Bullying" (2013). *On Sport and Society*. 86.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/86>

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
November 10, 2013

Did anyone notice that October was National Bullying Prevention Month? Apparently the Miami Dolphins did not get the memo.

The focus of the National Bullying Prevention Center is on children. Perhaps it should add the phrase "of all ages," as clearly those involved in the culture of the NFL locker room, and indeed locker rooms across the landscape of sport, fall into the "juvenile" category. One of the slogans of the campaign is: "Bullying can be prevented if we all work together to change the culture." That seems to be true, given that for the last ten days or so we have heard all sorts of comments about the "culture of the locker room" and the "culture of the NFL," as in "you out there don't get it." I confess, I don't get it, and I hope I never do.

Bullying has been in sport and in society for a very long time. It is seen in isolation, but more often it is seen as part of the process, or an extension of the process, of hazing. As a ritual of group acceptance, hazing too has been around a long time. In sport hazing is very common and certainly excessive hazing, a close cousin of bullying, has been an ongoing problem in sport.

Over a decade ago I wrote about hazing at the University of Vermont where members of the hockey team took part in what was called an "elephant walk." It involved team members in a single file naked procession grasping the penis of the young man directly behind them. About the same time at a Connecticut high school a member of the wrestling team was hog-tied, slammed into a wall, stuffed into a locker, and then had a plastic knife forced into his rectum by teammates.

The justification for this sort of behavior is always the same. It is about the camaraderie of the team, it fosters togetherness, and it is about being a man. In fact it is about the immaturity of adolescents, the perpetuation and justification of infantile behavior and it postpones the need to enter into the state of being a man.

The basics of this incident are fairly simple. Over the past year plus, Jonathon Martin has been a member of the

Miami Dolphins. He is a 300 pound offensive lineman and a Stanford graduate. Also during that time it is alleged that Richie Incognito, another 300 pound offensive lineman, has been bullying Martin. Martin left the team after an apparent hazing incident. Martin's lawyer has issued a strong statement. The details of all of this are in dispute and are being investigated on behalf of the Commissioner of the NFL.

Since all this hit the public press there has been a tsunami of comment from nearly everyone on the planet who ever knew of the existence of the National Football League. The most interesting have been the comments coming out of the Miami locker room and from current and former NFL players and coaches.

As the interviews and sound-bites accumulate on this subject a number of themes have emerged. There has been a lot said about being a man, and what a real man should or should not do in this situation. Few have suggested that Martin's choice to leave the team was the right one. Many have indicated that a real man would have confronted the bully physically. Violence or the threat of violence seems to be the preferred solution.

Martin, it is suggested, is soft. He couldn't take it and could react to it in the same manner as it was delivered. Martin's intellectual achievements, his soft-spoken manner, and his quiet demeanor have all been noted as negatives. Richie Incognito however is a fun guy, very physical and aggressive, tough, both physically and mentally, and the kind of guy who you want to have your back. He is also the kind of guy you want playing the line in the NFL where physicality and aggression are premium qualities in the violent sport of football.

Some coaches have said that although Incognito's behavior is over the line, still they would prefer his type on the line rather than someone who is soft. The fact that Incognito has been moved on and off teams because of his behavior would indicate that many football coaches at both the college and NFL levels found his aggressive physical qualities and his attitude a potential plus for their team.

Other players have been quoted about the negatives associated with Incognito, describing a player out of control who goes way over the line. Some have noted that

his actions on the field have contributed to team losses. Bill Polian, former GM of the Indianapolis Colts, said that the Colts refused to draft Incognito because of his character, and instead chose linemen of quality character and intellect.

Violence and aggression have now emerged as two very important components of the current crisis facing the NFL, because it is clear that these qualities also contribute to the crisis over concussions. To remove too much of the violence from the game of football would be to risk dampening its appeal.

As to bullying and hazing, these are clearly a subset of the violence and the aggressive culture of football. They are also an extension of juvenile and adolescent behavior. To be a man is to move out of the juvenile and adolescent world, into a world of responsibility where character still has some meaning. There is a reason that hazing is illegal in all but six states.

If there is a serious interest in removing bullying from this society, then the practice of hazing must be halted or severely muted at all levels of sport, and our role models in elite sport must be held to adult standards of behavior.

This is where the discussion about bullying, hazing, violence and manhood must begin.

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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