

Columbine and Jock Culture

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
April 28, 1999

If you are like me you are already weary, or just wary, of the endless analysis of the Colorado high school shootout that have blanketed the media over the past few days. The cable news networks seem to have found something worthy of their attention now that they no longer have Bill and Monica, and have become bored with the video game war in Serbia.

What has not been much discussed on television and which does interest me is the sport connection to this tragic event. The first such connection came almost immediately when it was reported that athletes were targeted by the killers, and that one of the two young men doing the shooting was a fantasy baseball player. The latter of course is of no more interest than the fact that the same young man was a Red Sox fan. But both were duly noticed and reported.

Although not discussed all that much on TV there are other sports connections in this story that have been discussed on the Sport Sociology Listserv. Prompted by the observations of Jay Coakley from the University of Colorado a number of sport sociologists have honed in on sport related issues at Columbine High School.

According to Coakley there has been a hostile relationship between athletes and the so-called "trench-coat mafia" at Columbine for at least two years. There is also a history of violence between the two groups. News reports have commented on the fact that the two killers had been harassed by athletes, mostly football players, and felt humiliated by them. The desire for revenge may have been a motive in the singling out of athletes in the shootings.

Mary Jo Kane of the University of Minnesota points out that while many will ask if the parents of the killers knew what their children had been doing, no one is likely to ask the same of parents and coaches of the athletes. In addition no one will ask if the athletes listen to Marilyn Manson, play video games of high violence, or are drawn to violent movies like "Natural Born Killers."

In the course of these discussions by the sport sociologists over several days many observations were made about how these events illuminate the male sporting culture, other gender

aspects of these events and reports, and the culture of conformity in the high school and its oppressive character.

None of this of course justifies what happened or even begins to adequately explain what happened, nor did anyone suggest this.

For those interested in sports and the interactions between sport and culture these events and connections are suggestive, and for me the most significant are the connections between the sporting culture and the pressures for social conformity. The father figure dictatorial coach is an old and sacred symbol in American society and the demands for conformity emanating from the coach can be oppressive while also community forming.

Watching professional athletics with all of its flamboyance, trash talking, celebratory dances and wiggles, and all of the interesting personalities that have emerged in the last decade it is hard to recall this conformist power. Although the range of tolerated behavior has widened, below that surface development the power of conformity in the sports culture is still quite powerful.

Many coaches still make high demands on players governing off field demeanor, have regulations limiting facial hair, and encourage "Christian" values among their teams. Ricky Williams' fall in the NFL draft to the fifth pick has been explained by more than one commentator in terms of "hair style."

Peter Donnelly of the University of Toronto points out that there is a "certain type of privileged male sport culture in which arrogance, intolerance, and bullyboy behaviour is both expected, tolerated, and even rewarded." Those who remember their high school days should have no difficulty remembering this, and those who remember the campus clashes of the Sixties will recall how it was often athletes, especially football players, who attacked the anti-war demonstrators.

One student at Columbine High School expressed his resentment of the fact that in terms of the enforcement of school regulations athletes are always treated with kid gloves. Certainly we all know of numerous cases which illustrate this pattern, and it has been much commented on up and down the educational and athletic system. The spoiled athlete has become a point of discussion in our culture.

It has been suggested that all of this played itself out heavily in Columbine High School, which according to Coakley is known as

a jock school. There is also a report that a Denver talk show had a six-hour discussion of these issues.

I found it interesting that there was a report on ESPN today of the first school activity since the shooting, a county championship soccer game won by the Columbine women's team. The report also noted that contributions of athletic equipment have poured into the school from around the country, as Columbine's athletic equipment is part of the impounded matter on school property.

Apparently the games must go on, even before classes resume.

You can be sure that a discussion of the healing powers of athletics will follow. Unfortunately there is likely to be much less discussion of the athletic culture and its part, whatever it might be, within the nexus of causation in these tragic events.

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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