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Mike Tyson Case - Sexual Assault and Athletes - Coverups

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
February 19, 1992

This has been a week of compelling sports stories. The NBA All-Star game in Orlando produced high drama when Magic Johnson was the MVP and finished the game making three shots from three-point range. The sixteenth Winter Olympic Games opened in Albertville, France, against the backdrop of the awesome natural setting of the French Alps.

But overshadowing all else this week was a story of courtroom drama in Indianapolis, where Mike Tyson, former Heavyweight Champion of the World, was convicted on a charge of rape, and two counts of diavate criminal conduct. His accuser was an 18 year old woman, a freshman at Providence College, and a former contestant in the Miss Black America pageant.

Other than the notoriety of the rapist, this was a rather ordinary rape case, and in fact presented the nation with a set of circumstances that is repeated with alarming frequency every day. It also was a set of circumstances that one finds much too often on the sports scene in America, and unfortunately on campuses across the nation. The only other unusual aspect of this case was the fact that the charges brought by the young college freshman, resulted in the conviction of a prominent athlete.

Over the past decade I have lost count of the number of reported cases of sexual attack by an athlete or a group of athletes on a co-ed on a college campus. I can recall only a very few cases in which a conviction resulted from the charges.

One example of such a case was in the news this past week, when the Florida Board of Regents received a report on administrative misconduct at the University of South Florida. Two years ago a star basketball player was accused of rape by a young woman. The player was suspended briefly by the Vice-President for Student Affairs, then reinstated, because the woman had recanted. The VP admitted later that there was no such retraction. In less than two years the same player was accused by six women of verbal harassment, battery and rape. These incidents began within a month of the athlete's arrival on campus in August of 1989 and continued through February of 1991. None of them led to disciplinary action against the basketball player.

Meanwhile the woman who made the original accusation was harassed by athletes and their girlfriends. She reported these incidents to school officials but they took absolutely no action. The woman finally had to withdraw her complaint under this pressure. There was a total coverup by University officials to protect the athlete and keep him playing basketball.

The Tyson case and the South Florida case are related. They both speak to an atmosphere that exists within sport generally; an atmosphere in which sport has been used to define masculinity and therefore is tied to sexuality; and an atmosphere of permissiveness for star athletes who are treated as privileged figures in American society.

Since the rise of organized sport in America in the 19th century, sport has been valued as an arena in which men can develop and display their masculinity. Of all sports boxing, and later football, was most identified with masculine traits of aggression and power, traits associated in this culture with male sexuality, and which inform the male-female sexual relationship. It should not be surprising that the well-developed male body of the athlete is seen as an expression of masculinity and sexual potency, and the sexual exploits of male athletes have become legend in the culture. Most recently this has been displayed not only in the Tyson case, but also in the boasting of Wilt Chamberlain that he had sexual intercourse with 20,000 women, and indirectly in the sigh of relief given when the public was assured that Magic Johnson contracted AIDS from heterosexual rather than homosexual activity. Furthermore the tendency to give exceptionally talented athletes anything and everything they want, leads some in turn to take whatever they want. This is a pattern experienced by the talented athlete from a very early age, and not surprisingly they learn that they can not only take whatever they want, but that there will likely be no consequences from their actions. Star athletes are too often exempted from the norms of behavior expected of ordinary citizens. Clearly this was the case at the University of South Florida.

Not surprisingly, there are times when these tendencies run together; when there is an athlete who finds his sexuality defined in his athleticism and reconfirmed in his sexual exploits, and also gets whatever he wants. There are groupies who offer themselves sexually to the athletes. Unfortunately when such an offer is not made, and when it has come to be expected, there might be a tendency to take it, even when it is not offered.

Mike Tyson certainly matured in this sort of sporting atmosphere. The string of charges of sexual harassment and fondling, the paternity suits, and even the description of him by his own attorneys as a sex machine, would indicate that Mike Tyson did not, and did not expect to, live by the standard norms of sexual conduct.

In a society in which incidents like the one at the University of South Florida occur with alarming frequency, in which star athletes are treated as a privileged class, and in which sport and sexual identity run together, the real question is, should a Mike Tyson case surprise anyone?

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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