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Nick Anderson Accused: Don't Rush to Judgement

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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Last Wednesday Nick Anderson of the Magic called a press conference to deny that he had raped a woman last February. It was an emotional scene at which a tearful Anderson told the press that a complaint had been filed with Orlando police in early October, and that he had been threatened with public exposure by the Pan African InterNational Movement (PAIN) unless he paid them \$600,000.

Two days later representatives of PAIN held a press conference which featured the organization's president who is also the father of the alleged victim. He denied the charges of extortion and challenged Anderson and his lawyer to produce the letter. He denounced Anderson, the Magic fans who cheered Anderson lustily on Thursday night, and the Orlando police whom he charged were moving too slowly on the case. The woman's father said the police had been given medical evidence of the rape, and threatened direct action if something didn't happen in the legal system soon. To underline the point, the leader of PAIN let it be known he has been in contact with Louis Farrakhan.

Little has happened since the Friday press conference except that Anderson's security has been increased.

There are any number of troubling issues surrounding the handling of this case by the Orlando media and Magic fans. Friday's newspaper in a peculiar editorial decision featured the story of Penny Hardaway's knee surgery on the front page of the paper, while the press conference by PAIN was featured on the front page of the Sports Section. I would have thought that Penny's knee was a sports story, while accusations of rape directed at Anderson was a news story.

In addition the paper described Anderson as "a popular and charitable player." Much more coverage was given to the support for Anderson than was given the next day to Anderson's accusers, although it was mentioned that Anderson has fathered three children by three different women.

As for Magic fans, on Thursday night they cheered Anderson's every move, posters of support dotted the O-rena, while a group of women gathered in front of the O-rena before the game holding a sign saying, "We Believe in Nick." In short Magic fans offered a major outpouring of support and affection to Anderson, and he acknowledged his gratitude after the game.

As I watched and listened to all of this I wondered how one comes to these positions. What prompted the Sentinel to present the story in the way it did? How do fans decide guilt or innocence in these cases with virtually no evidence on either side. As for the Sentinel, I will not speculate, although I was not surprised by their treatment of the case.

For the fans it is not a difficult decision. If they like the player, if the player has a good reputation in the community, and if little is known of the accuser then many fans will throw caution aside and give their support to the player. If on the other hand the player has a reputation for violence and womanizing, a bad track record with the public, and is seen as an unsavory character, the fans are likely to accept the accusation as plausible if not true. In addition stars get a greater benefit of the doubt than do marginal players.

Nonetheless it is disturbing that Anderson's play in a game of basketball becomes the means of expressing one's feelings about his guilt or innocence in a matter totally unrelated to the game. There was an undertone of vindication accorded to Anderson because he played well that night, an undertone that was present in both fan reaction at the arena and in media comment on his excellent play Thursday evening.

This is a function of the same distortions that operate in our use of athletes as heroes and role models. Bouncing a ball, putting it in hoop, and running the court do not reflect character and should not be associated in any way as a gauge of character. To do so is not a healthy community attitude.

It is also not a good civic atmosphere for judgements about rape cases, and could indeed have a chilling affect on women who seeing this reaction and choose then not to report cases of date rape or any other kind of rape.

In a similar case involving Mike Tyson the tendency in the press was to believe the woman. Tyson's history of violence, especially to women in his life, and his general unsavory reputation, made the charges plausible. In the case of Nick Anderson his public image in Orlando is such that the tendency is to give him the benefit of the doubt. In both cases judgements are made with little evidence and largely on the basis of reputation and popularity.

Wouldn't it be better if we could simply suspend judgement until the evidence is presented? Neither the basketball court nor the court of public opinion should be the court to make these judgements.

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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