

11-11-1998

College and Pro Athletes: Crime and Punishment

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "College and Pro Athletes: Crime and Punishment" (1998). *On Sport and Society*. 492.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/492>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
NOVEMBER 11, 1998

There have been headlines over the past week about crime statistics from the National Football League. Jeff Benedict and Don Yaeger in their new book, Pros and Cons: The Criminals Who Play in the NFL, claim that one in five (21%) of all the players in the NFL have been charged with at least one serious crime. Among these are two murders, seven rape charges, 45 counts of domestic violence and 42 charges of assault. What is worse, say Yaeger and Benedict, the National Football League continues to employ these kinds of people at huge salaries and the NFL seems to have no interest in reform in this area.

In 1997 when the Rams drafted a player who was awaiting trial for assault that left the victim paralyzed and with brain damage, Ram coach Dick Vermeil was quoted as saying, "He can finish a fight. That's a positive." Vermeil made headlines again last week when he welcomed back one of his players who was facing charges of involuntary manslaughter, for killing another driver while driving drunk. Vermeil's comments were once again particularly insensitive.

Dick Vermeil is not the only coach or general manager implicated in this pattern of behavior and attitudes. Officials of the Atlanta Falcons, New York Giants, Miami Dolphins, Baltimore Ravens, Cincinnati Bengals, Washington Redskins, Oakland Raiders and others have signed players to big contracts who are at best high risks with impressive rap sheets in hand. In fact only the New England Patriots have ever confronted the issue head on when owner Robert Kraft cut draftee Christian Peter following the 1996 draft.

Although the NFL has taken action against those violating league drug policies or gambling policies, argue Yaeger and Benedict, it has not been inclined to suspend those under indictment for violent crimes. NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue has never suspended a player under those circumstances.

Many aspects of this story catch the eye and there certainly can be valid arguments over the conflicting claims of constitutional rights and league policies and actions. The fact that players are suspended for lesser offenses and not greater ones does raise eyebrows.

More interesting to me is the "one in five" player figure. First it is important to note, as many have, that these are not

conviction numbers only charges. Also once a person pays their debt to society by serving a legal punishment they should be allowed to earn a living. Nonetheless even if the number is one in six or seven, it still seems fairly high.

It is also a number that reflects back on intercollegiate sports and a tolerance on the campus similar to the tolerance in the NFL. Where did these NFL players come from? If they are producing these numbers in the NFL, were they not also producing them in college? And if so, were the college coaches, athletic directors, student disciplinary councils, and college presidents guilty of the same sort of indifference to violent crime with which Yaeger and Benedict have charged the NFL?

One need only peruse the headlines from a season of college football, basketball, and other forms of intercollegiate athletics to find story after story and case after case of violent crimes perpetrated by athletes in the athletic programs of America's institutions of higher education.

The cases at Nebraska a few years ago involving the aforementioned Christian Peter and the now legendary Lawrence Phillips rush forward in the memory. In the past I have chronicled such cases over and over again in these commentaries. My files are bulging with cases from the past six years, and in nearly all of them the same indifference displayed by the NFL, can be found on the campuses. In a six-month period in 1996 Clemson, Nebraska, Mississippi State, TCU, Virginia Tech, Miami, and Montana had to deal with a variety of assault and disorderly conduct charges involving their athletes. In too many of these cases excuses rather than strong disciplinary actions were the result. The level of concern is of course inversely related to the level of talent of the athletes involved.

Why is this tolerated on campus? Because intercollegiate athletics is entertainment and big business and coaches are under tremendous pressure to win. To do that they need athletes, especially highly talented athletes, one of whom can make or break a college team and season. If they do not win they do not continue to work.

So if there is a problem in the NFL one can assume that it finds its origins on the campus. And if there are problems on the campus, from where did they come? No doubt the high schools. And before that the middle schools and the primary schools and the youth programs across the land in which 7 year-olds are "red-shirted" and the athletically talented are told from an early

age that they are different. That they are privileged. That the ordinary rules of society that are applied to all their classmates do not apply to them. From an early age extremely talented athletes learn that consequences do not necessarily follow from their actions.

The problems featured by Yaeger and Benedict do not suddenly appear at the elite professional level. These problems are nurtured by a system that places way too much emphasis on winning from a very early age, and treats talented athletes in ways different from ordinary children.

Those who grow up in a world of privilege through athletics and those who perpetuate such a world can be found up and down the athletic structure in America. This is why Yaeger and Benedict have found the data they are offering in their study, and it is why you can expect little to change despite the considerable amount of attention being given to this book.

If any of this is to change it must come from the top. It is the pro-dream that is the ultimate reward for the talented athlete, and the road to that reward usually passes through a campus somewhere. To change the climate at the lower levels one must change it at the higher levels. Multi-million dollar contracts should not be a reward for crimes, and full scholarships and booster fringe benefits should not go those who are a threat on campus.

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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