

Social Justice and the Cult of Collegiate Football in the United States

by Rachel Whitfield

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Like many students in the South, I grew up in a football-centric culture. The connection I share with my father has been maintained through the years, in part, by a shared love of the football program at the University of Oklahoma. Aside from fostering such bonds, benefits of the collegiate brand of football include the provision of academic opportunities for players who may have been unable to afford the pursuit of higher education otherwise and the garnering of vital support networks and funding for universities. This same sport, however, has also helped to develop an American culture which values displays of aggression above all forms of intellectual achievement. When universities place emphasis on a sport like football, they are supporting an institution which intentionally endangers athletes and those associated with them through an exclusive brand of hypermasculinity – one which encourages violence off the field and discourages societal participation by those who do not conform to its standards. When these schools neglect to suspend or expel football players in equal measure with the rest of the student population, they are perpetuating discrimination against – possibly even endangering – non-football-playing students. Issues of funding for athletic programs and social inaction by students have

further complicated the problem of college football.

Even when taken at face-value, the sport of football causes repeated head injuries which, in addition to causing long-term brain damage in players, also seem to be contributing to their violent actions off the field. Symptoms of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a brain disease found in over 30 deceased NFL players (some of whom committed suicide), include aggression and lack of impulse control (Gregory). The most widely publicized victim of the disorder is Jovan Belcher, a Kansas City Chiefs linebacker who, in 2012, shot his girlfriend nine times and then – in the parking lot of the Chiefs’ practice facility – turned the gun on himself (Gregory). According to Dr. Sam Gandy, director of the Mount Sinai Center for Cognitive Health and NFL Neurological Center, whether severe head injuries have been suffered or not, the frontal lobe, which helps control behavior, is often jostled around on impact, and the resulting damage can cause mood swings and even violence (Gregory). Although researchers are working to identify cases of CTE in active players (for the moment, the disease can only be diagnosed posthumously) in order to definitively establish this link, it is impossible to ignore the implication: players who



Fans crowd into the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, TX for the 101st “Red River Shootout” between the University of Oklahoma Sooners and the University of Texas Longhorns.

spend years knocking their brains around will see the effects of this behavior, and these effects often present themselves in the form of players' violent actions against themselves or others (Gregory). Even more sickening is the notion that statistics regarding the prevalence of brain injuries as a result of the high level of physicality in the sport have been collected solely from NFL players—a fact that introduces the negligence with which university administrators have addressed the effects of football culture on their campuses.

When it comes to football, there are numerous reasons for such negligence. Without a strong program, many universities would likely lose influential donors and an ease of recruitment, among other things. Thus, rather than cutting football expenses, schools cut other sports (and, in turn, scholarships) for both male and female athletes in order to conserve funding. In 2006, for example, James Madison University cut three of its women's teams, along with seven of its men's teams in order to "streamline" its athletic program and to remain in compliance with Title IX (Lipka). Mary Jo Kane, director of the Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, points out that the roster for the university's football team (99 players) could have been cut in half—a change which would put the number closer to National Football League standards (53 players)—in order to achieve the school's goals (Lipka). The university's athletic director, Jeffrey T. Bourne—in a statement which disregards the potential of the ten teams whose opportunities were taken away altogether—said that he would not want to put his football team at a "competitive disadvantage" (Lipka). James Madison's new rules also allow the program to deny requests of women's club teams to become varsity teams (Lipka). Adding a varsity team requires the school to cut or reduce scholarships for other sports (football), a step which universities such as James Madison are reluctant to take.

Pro football plays an even more significant role in the trivialization of women's college sports. At the professional level, legitimate women's teams find little success in gaining media attention or popularity with the public. The National Women's Football League (now defunct) was even forced by the NFL—which was "protecting its brand"—to change its name. Yet the Lingerie Football League—in which actresses or models play a version of football wearing lingerie—openly aligns itself with the NFL, even using NFL teams' colors to represent the same cities, and the NFL has taken no similar action (Knapp 143–144). The LFL, like the female cheerleaders at collegiate and professional football games, displays the role of the sport in reinforcing gender norms in the United States. The sexualizing of female athletes serves to quash their individuality and athleticism while exemplifying a belief that the role of women is that of a sexual object for male pleasure. It also reserves the position of dominance in the sports world for men. Women's access is restricted when it comes to contact sports such as football, and, when it is granted, physicality is limited and disempowering media representations are perpetuated. These media representations include a focus on physical attractiveness, the exclusion of non-heterosexual women, and habitual reference to family roles (Knapp 144–145). Considering the treatment of women attempting to gain access to football at the professional level, it is no surprise that little effort has been made at the university level to include women in the sport in a non-sexualized manner. Keeping women from playing football on the same level as men maintains the high standard of masculinity of the sport, while supporting the sexualizing of women who take any part in it trivializes the effort of the female athlete to be taken seriously.

Women are far from the only demographic harmed by collegiate football culture: to date, no active athlete in the NFL has declared himself to be anything other than cisgender and heterosex-

ual. Michael Sam, who came out while playing football at the University of Missouri, was drafted but was subsequently released by both the St. Louis Rams and Dallas Cowboys (Mazzei 159). Sam, one of 17 players chosen as the Southeastern Conference (SEC) defensive player of the year by The Associated Press since 1996, was even selected 145 places lower in the draft than any previous winner (Newberry). Football culture remains one of a declining number of spaces in which being LGBTQ continues to present a threat harsh enough to force one to stay in the closet. A 2011 *Sports Illustrated* survey of 1,400 pro athletes showed that, unsurprisingly, NFL players are the least likely of the four major pro leagues to welcome an openly gay teammate, with 43% saying that they would not (Wolf). The NFL's track record – or lack thereof – with the LGBTQ community would understandably deter collegiate LGBTQ players from being comfortable in their own locker rooms, and, by default, being comfortable as “out” students on campus. The mere presence of a sport with such attitudes on university campuses should be enough to raise controversy among students, and yet football has remained the most popular collegiate sport in the nation for decades.

Unfortunately, the attitudes expressed by its players fall short of the pinnacle of controversy for the sport. Football is a sport which requires acts of violence in order to advance play. When groups of young adult males are repeatedly pressured to commit violent acts in a controlled setting, causing severe head trauma to themselves and others in the process, some of these students are bound to carry such aggression to other areas of their lives. A 2014 study of NFL crime statistics found that, when accounting for the high income level of the average NFL player, domestic violence arrest rates for pro footballers are extraordinarily high (Morris). And in a 1997 study of NFL players, Michael Welch found that “scorers” (running backs and receivers) represented the majority of those arrested for committing violent acts against women. It is no coincidence that ball-

carrying players, who are subjected to more head injuries as a result of being tackled, are those most likely to become violent off the field later in their careers. This statistic could also suggest that the more prestige a player is given on the field and in the locker room, the more likely the player may be to carry this perceived power to other aspects of his life. The “controlled” violence he has been taught to participate in on field may continue to manifest itself outside of the aggression-bubble.

In the realm of collegiate athletics, this perceived power comes through for him outside the game in the form of coaches and school administrators, supposed figures of moral authority who are all too familiar with the profitability margin of young football stars. This football-player privilege has shown itself in cases such as that of running back Joe Mixon of the University of Oklahoma. In July of 2014, a surveillance video was released which showed Mixon punching another student, breaking four bones in her face and knocking her unconscious (Neff). That October, he accepted a plea deal on a misdemeanor assault charge and was given a year-long deferred sentence, 100 hours of community service and mandatory counseling. In terms of university punishment, Mixon was suspended from the team for a season, but was allowed to remain on campus and continue attending classes (Neff). Recalling that Oklahoma's president, David Boren, expelled two (non-football-playing) students for leading a racist chant earlier the same year, Mixon's punishment seems light by comparison. Boren justified his decision by citing a belief in “second chances” for students, though this policy apparently applies only to football players (Neff). As alarming as verbal threats and racism are on a college campus, an act of violence should in all cases be considered a more dangerous crime, for what should be – but apparently aren't – obvious reasons.

In part, this could be blamed on politics: it should be noted that the student body was out in full-force to signal its disdain for racism on campus, while no such demonstration was organized to protest Mixon's crime. Also worthy of mention

is that the football team, joined by its coaches, refused to practice until action was taken against the racist students. It is fair to assume, based on the outcome of Mixon's case, that the team and its coaching staff would have taken no part had there been a demonstration against one of their own. The team includes players of color; it includes no women. Boren's actions in both cases were swayed by the pressures placed on him — or not placed on him — by OU's students. So the question becomes: why would there be such an outcry against racist statements but not against the physical abuse of women? Surely football players' acts of violence have not become so commonplace as to be completely ignored by university students. While blatant racist statements have become taboo enough to warrant a school-wide outcry, acts of violence by football players, as well as the game's perpetuation of sexism and homophobia, have somehow slipped into a blind-spot of ignorant acceptance on college campuses.

Since Mixon's return to the team for the 2015 season, the Sooners have won eleven of thirteen games. Mixon played a critical role in defeating Oklahoma State in a game which made OU conference champions, his first play being a 66-yard touchdown run. He finished the game with 136 rushing yards and two scores (Bailey). Although, at surface level, such statistics create the illusion that Coach Bob Stoops, President Boren, and athletic director Joe Castiglione allowed Mixon to fulfill his potential at OU, the reality is that allowing a student with a history of violence to remain a part of a violent sport is absolutely the worst decision these men could have made for him. By allowing players like Mixon a "second chance," they communicate to other players — and to the violent players themselves — that the behavior was, and continues to be, acceptable. When schools like OU express such hesitance to remove players from the football team (whether due to favoritism or in pursuit of victory), they are dismissing the ideals of justice and equality alto-

gether, and they are endangering the lives of their students. The message being sent by universities who take little action to punish football players who commit violent crimes, and specifically those against women, is a dangerous one with the power to shape common thought on university campuses.

This is not to say that the University of Oklahoma stands alone in such negligence. As previously noted, the lack of head trauma statistics in collegiate players is the fault of every university with the resources to conduct the necessary studies. There are also numerous cases in which major universities clearly indicated that their priorities did not necessarily favor safety and fairness for all students. For instance, in August of 2015, Baylor University's Sam Ukwuachu was sentenced to six months in jail and ten years' probation for sexually assaulting another student. Although the rape had been committed two years prior, Ukwuachu's sentencing marked the first time Baylor's president, Ken Starr, even addressed the issue (Nocera). According to Texas Monthly, the school had cleared Ukwuachu shortly following the report without even requesting to see the rape kit (Nocera). At the time, Baylor was apparently content to ignore the case altogether, producing only vague answers as to why Ukwuachu failed to play the 2014 season. And, though he sat out games following his indictment, Ukwuachu continued to practice with the team (Nocera). BU's defensive coordinator even said publicly that he expected Ukwuachu to play the 2015 season as recently as two months before the trial. Following the trial, Starr said that, in order to prevent further incidents, Baylor would hire an official to oversee "all student-athlete behavior" (Nocera). That is, one staff member for all 500 of Baylor's athletes.

What's more disconcerting is that, even when universities take proper action to remove the offending player, that player is often quickly accepted to play at another school. For example, when the University of Georgia dismissed Jona-

than Taylor following a domestic violence arrest in July of 2014, he was playing with Alabama by January of the following year. Three months later, he was arrested based on another accusation of domestic violence and was dismissed from UA as well (Noren). Shortly after Taylor's second dismissal, the SEC introduced a rule which prohibits an athlete from transferring to an SEC school if the athlete has been "officially disciplined" by another school for serious misconduct (defined by the SEC as sexual assault, domestic violence, or other forms of sexual violence) (Noren). While the passage of this rule by a Division I athletic conference itself is a major step towards controlling some of the negative effects of college football, the contention that arises from this case in particular is the fact that such a rule was necessary in the first place; after all, Alabama was not the sole Division I school to recruit Taylor after his Georgia dismissal (Noren).

The social beast that has been created by football allows for a state of intentional ignorance by students and administrators alike on university campuses. Student protests commonly touch on such topics as racism and funding issues, but, even for all of its controversies, even for every female student with a broken jaw, they never come near football. While the discipline of players can be structured by new rules, the social inaction of students when it comes to football injustice is a phenomenon which may not allow for much real social progress. The tradition of football in the United States is apparently enough to constrain student dissent against its violent, misogynistic, homophobic culture. Most students don't seem to care that, for every "second chance" granted, another social injustice is perpetrated at the expense of their peer(s). If fathers like mine were to consider the consequences such a tradition could realistically have on the lives of their daughters, they would not be so eager to share it.

Regardless of its tradition in the United States, football, in its current state, belongs no-

where near institutions of higher education. This game trains athletes to commit violent acts on the field and then creates in them a neurological predisposition to carry these actions off the field. And when these crimes are inevitably committed, collegiate players are often not held responsible because of their roles in the game, further reinforcing these aggressive behaviors. Out-of-context, the majority of Americans, certainly the majority of college students, would oppose an institution which causes long-term brain damage to its participants, encourages violent, reckless acts, and condones a standard of dominance that often manifests itself through violence against and sexual objectification of women. The cult of ignorance which has arisen around the sport of football has long overstayed its welcome on university campuses.



Current and former students at Baylor University holding a silent protest of the university's alleged mishandling of a rape investigation involving a player on the university's football team.

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