

Playing Center: The Triad of Violence in Men's Sports

In November 2000, newspapers reported that six high school football players in Yucca Valley, California, had been arrested on felony charges of false imprisonment, sexual battery, rape with a foreign object, and conspiracy. The crimes were allegedly perpetrated during a hazing ritual, when senior members of the football team “initiated” freshmen and sophomore members of the team.¹ These days, we seem to hear story after story describing male athletes’ violent acts of ritualized hazing on athletic teams, acquaintance and gang rapes perpetrated against women, and verbal and physical abuse of girlfriends and spouses.² Statements of shock and surprise routinely follow these stories. School officials and coaches, backed up by psychologists and other professionals, vow to develop better means of “weeding out the bad apples” in the future. A common working assumption in these cases is that the perpetrators of these kinds of violent acts are deviating from the norms of proper behavior in the school and on the athletic teams. As the Yucca Valley principal put it in the wake of the charges against his students, “Some bad things are alleged to have happened. It’s unfortunate, because these things tend to eclipse all the good things we’re doing here.”³

Are male athletes more likely than nonathletes to engage in acts of violence off the field, or when some athletes assault others are we just more likely to notice it because of their high-profile public status?⁴ In this chapter, I will argue that we should not be surprised when we hear

of male athletes committing acts of off-the-field violence, whether sexual or otherwise. Far from being an aberration perpetrated by some marginal deviants, male athletes' off-the-field violence is generated from the normal, everyday dynamics at the center of male athletic culture. Indeed, a number of studies of men's college athletics in recent years have pointed to statistically significant relationships between athletic participation and sexual aggression.⁵ In what is widely considered the most reliable study to date, sociologist Todd Crosset and his colleagues surveyed twenty universities with Division I athletic programs and found that male athletes, who in 1995 made up 3.7 percent of the student population, were 19 percent of those reported to campus Judicial Affairs offices for sexual assault.⁶ In a more recent article, Crosset argues that researchers have more than likely been using far too broad a brush in looking generally at the relationship of "men's sports" to violence against women.⁷ Studies that have involved comparisons across various sports have found important differences: the vast majority of reported assaults were perpetrated by athletes in revenue-producing contact sports such as basketball, football, and ice hockey. For instance, in Crosset's study, male football and basketball players made up 30 percent of the student-athlete population but were responsible for 67 percent of the reported sexual assaults. These data, according to Crosset, should warn us of the dangers of "lumping all sport environments together under the rubric of 'athletic affiliation.'"⁸ More to the point of my argument in this book, the research points to the conclusion that the athletes most likely to engage in sexual and other violent assaults off the field are those participating in the sports that I define as being at the institutional center of sport.

Some activists such as Donald McPherson, of the University of Massachusetts Mentors in Violence program, are wary of pointing the finger at athletes. McPherson argues that athletes are no more or less likely than other men to be engaged in violence against women. Rather, men's violence against women is a broad social problem that is proportionately reflected, like other social problems, in sport.⁹ Perhaps fearing that pointing the finger at high-profile athletes will reinforce destructive

and oppressive stereotypes of African American males (who make up about 80 percent of the NBA, for instance) as violent sexual predators, activists like McPherson prefer instead to pull male athletes into positions of responsibility to educate peers to prevent violence against women. This is a real concern. As the media frenzy surrounding the trials of Mike Tyson and O. J. Simpson (for rape and for murder, respectively) illustrated, American culture seems especially obsessed with what Stuart Alan Clarke has called images of “black men misbehaving,” especially if the alleged misbehaviors involve a combination of sex and violence.¹⁰ Given the ways that racist stereotypes of black men as violent sexual predators have historically served as a foundation for institutional and personal violence perpetrated against African Americans, we should be wary of the various ways that these images continue to surface.¹¹ So, when data reveal that college athletes in revenue-producing sports have higher rates of sexual assault against women, there is a very real danger that the term *athletes in revenue-producing sports* will smuggle in racist stereotypes as a thinly veiled code word for *black male athletes*.¹²

Evidence suggests that the apparent overrepresentation of black male athletes charged with sexual assault in college is due to their dramatic overrepresentation in the central team sports of football and basketball. When we look at high schools, where white males are more evenly represented in the student athlete population, we see that white male athletes perpetrated many of the most egregious examples of sexual assault. And when we look at Canada, where the central sport, ice hockey, is dominated by white men, we see the vast majority of sexual assaults by athletes are committed by white males.¹³ Following this logic, I begin with the assumption that it is not their race or ethnicity but their *positions at the center of athletics* that make certain male athletes more likely to engage in sexual assault than other men.

This is not to confuse the “center” with the “majority.” In fact, a key to my analysis is the fact that the majority of male athletes do *not* commit acts of off-the-field violence against women or other men. Though in the numerical minority, the men at the center of the athletic peer group are expressing the dominant, hegemonic, most honored form

of masculinity. What helps hegemonic masculinity sustain itself as the dominant form in a system of power relations is the *complicity* of other men, some (or many) of whom might be uncomfortable with some of the beliefs and practices that sustain hegemonic masculinity. Intervention strategies must confront the root causes of men's violence against women, and a key way to accomplish this confrontation is to provide a context in which the "silent majority" of men move affirmatively away from being quietly complicit with the culture of misogyny, homophobia, and violence at the center of men's sport culture.

We saw in the previous chapter how early experiences in sports commonly divide children into seemingly different and opposed groups of "the boys" and "the girls." In this chapter, I will show how, once separated into all-male homosocial groups, boys and men tend to construct a masculine, athletic center through their everyday peer group interactions. And they construct this center through what political scientist Michael Kaufman calls a "triad of men's violence," which consists of men's violence against women, against other men, and against themselves.¹⁴ Homosocial sport offers an institutional context in which boys and men learn, largely from each other, to discipline their bodies, attitudes, and feelings within the logic of the triad of men's violence. I will look separately at the three aspects of the triad of men's violence, first examining men's violence against women, next turning to an analysis of men's violence against other men, and finally looking at men's violence against their own bodies. My goal in this chapter is to locate the key linking processes that hold this triad of men's violence together: group-based processes of misogyny, homophobia, and suppression of empathy. My level of analysis in this chapter is primarily interactional. That is, I focus mostly on the ways that boys and men perform a particular form of masculinity in their athletic peer groups.

Male Athletes' Violence against Women

In a riveting account of the infamous 1989 Glen Ridge, New Jersey, gang rape case, journalist Bernard Lefkowitz describes how thirteen white male, high-status high school athletes lured a seventeen-year-old

“slightly retarded” girl into a basement.¹⁵ The dynamics of the sexual assault that ensued are instructive for my purposes here: First, the boys set up chairs, theater style, in front of a couch. While some boys sat in the chairs to watch, others led the girl to the couch and induced her to begin to give one of the highest-status boys oral sex. When the assault began, one sophomore boy noticed “puzzlement and confusion” in the girl’s eyes, turned to his friend, and said, “Let’s get out of here.” Another senior baseball player felt queasy, thought, “I don’t belong here,” and climbed the stairs to leave with another baseball player. On the way out, he told another guy, “It’s wrong. C’mon with me,” but the other guy stayed.¹⁶ In all, six of the young men left the scene, while seven—six seniors and one junior—remained in the basement. While the girl was forced to continue giving oral sex to the boy, other boys laughed, yelled encouragement to their friends, and derisively shouted, “You whore!” at the girl. One boy decided it would be amusing to force a baseball bat up her vagina. When he did this (and followed it with a broomstick), the girl heard one boy’s voice say, “Stop. You’re hurting her,” but another voice prevailed: “Do it more.” Later, the girl remembered that the boys were all laughing while she was crying. When they were done, they warned her not to tell anyone and concluded with an athletic ritual of togetherness by standing in a circle and clasping “one hand on top of the other, all their hands together, like a basketball team on the sidelines at the end of a timeout.”¹⁷

In his description of the Glen Ridge community in which the boys and their victim grew up, Lefkowitz points to a number of factors that enabled the gang rape to happen, and these are the very same factors that much of the social scientific literature on men, sexual violence, and sport has pointed to in recent years:

1. the key role of competitive, homophobic, and misogynistic talk and joking as the central, most honored form of dominance bonding in the athletic male peer group
2. the group practice of “voyeurism,” whereby boys set up situations where they seduce girls into places and situations in which their

friends can watch the sex act and sometimes take an active part in it

3. the suppression of empathy toward others—especially toward the girls who are the objects of their competitive dominance bonding—that the boys learn from each other
4. the enabling of some men’s sexual violence against women by a “culture of silence” among peers, in families, and in the community

As I examine these four enabling factors, I will keep in the forefront Lefkowitz’s observation that four football players and wrestlers physically perpetrated the assault. Three others apparently sat and watched, sometimes laughing and cheering, but did not actually physically join in the assault.¹⁸ The other six boys left the scene when the assault was beginning. Though these six boys felt uncomfortable enough to leave the scene, they did not do anything at the time to stop their friends, nor did they report the assault to parents, teachers, or the police. And they all refused throughout the subsequent long and painful years of litigation to “turn” on their male friends and provide incriminating evidence. It is the *complicity* of these boys that I take as the centerpiece of my analysis here.

Sexual Talk and Dominance Bonding

In an ethnographic study of eleven- and twelve-year-old Little League baseball players, sociologist Gary Alan Fine found that one of the key ways that these boys connected with each other was through sexually aggressive banter.¹⁹ Reading Fine’s descriptions of boys’ verbal sparring brought back memories of engaging in what we called cut fights during childhood. I learned in grade school that high-status boys achieved and maintained their centrality in the male peer group not simply through athletic prowess but also through informal, often homophobic and misogynist, banter on the playgrounds, streets, and playing fields. Those who were the most ruthlessly competitive “cut fighters” seemed always capable of one-upping another boy’s insults. Following another boy’s sharp, cutting insult with silence or with a lame comment like “you

too” left one open to derision. I learned this firsthand one day while walking home from fifth grade with a group of boys. Chris, a boy well known for his verbal prowess, and I were in a cut fight. Back and forth we went. I thought I was doing pretty well until Chris hit me with one for which I had no answer: “Messner,” he asserted, “blow me!” I didn’t know what to say back, and so of course I lost the cut fight. But behind my lack of response was confusion. In my eleven-year-old mind, I knew a few things about sex but was unclear about others. One thing I had recently learned from friends was that there were some men who had sex with other men. They were called homosexuals, and I was told that they were sick and sinful individuals. So, my confused mind spun, if Chris was saying, “blow me,” to me, he was in effect asking me to be involved in some homosexual act with him. If homosexuality is such a bad and shameful thing, why then did *he* win the cut fight?

It took me years to figure that one out. Meanwhile, in the short run, I simply added “blow me” to my own cut fight repertoire. Now I can see that insults like “you suck,” “blow me,” or “fuck you” smuggle into children’s and preadolescent groups a powerful pedagogy about sexuality, power, and domination.²⁰ In short, though children obviously do not intend it, through this sort of banter they teach each other that sex, whether of the homosexual or heterosexual kind, is a relational act of domination and subordination. The “men” are the ones who are on top, in control, doing the penetrating and fucking. Women, or penetrated men, are subordinate, degraded, and dehumanized objects of sexual aggression. This kind of sexual domination is played out most clearly in cases of rape in men’s prisons, where those being raped are symbolically defined as either women or fags.²¹ The actual sexual orientation of these men matters little in these cases; it is their vulnerable, subordinate, and degraded status that makes them “women” or “fags.” By contrast, those who are doing the raping are not defined as gay. They are “men” who are powerful, in control, and dominant over the symbolically debased “women” or “fags.”

A key to the importance of this verbal sparring is the central role it plays in *groups*. Rarely will two boys, alone, engage in a cut fight. But

put the same two boys in a group, they will often be compelled to insult each other or to turn on another boy in the group. A cut fight is a group phenomenon that requires an audience. On center stage are the higher-status boys; around the periphery are the lower-status boys, constituted as an admiring audience who, by their very presence, attention, and laughter, validate the higher status of the boys at the center. This dynamic starts early. In their study of first graders, sport scholars Cynthia Hasbrook and Othello Harris observed that “Martin,” the highest-status boy in the class, was both athletically tough and socially aggressive. When he refused to hold hands during a relay race, this had an impact on the other boys:

Other boys fell over themselves trying to be friends with Martin. They mimicked his speech, gestures, and postures; they covered for him so that he would not get in trouble; sought him out as a partner; and wrote stories portraying him as their friend. Martin constantly negotiated a masculine identity that was physically aggressive, tough, distant, and cool, and his refusal to join hands both consolidated his ascendant position and constricted other expressions of masculinity.²²

These same tendencies are evident among preadolescent children. Patricia Adler and Peter Adler point to patterns of high-status grade school children picking on lower-status kids as well as teasing and “in-group subjugation” as key elements that “served to solidify the group and to assert the power of the strong over the vulnerability of the weak.”²³ Similarly, in their study of high school basketball players, Scott Eveslage and Kevin Delaney found that the boys’ “trash talking” on the court and their “insult talk” among teammates off the field have common traits: they establish hierarchies, they “involve personal insults or put-downs, often as calls to defend masculinity and honor, and they often degrade objects defined as ‘feminine.’”²⁴ These processes continue into the worlds of young adult men. In a revealing study of talk in a college men’s athletic locker room, sociologist Tim Curry observed that there is a dominant mode of conversation that is inclined toward the dual

themes of competition and boasting of sexual conquests of women.²⁵ This dominant conversation is characterized by its high volume—it is clearly intended as a performance for the group—and by its geographic and cultural centrality in the locker room.

But Curry's study also revealed a less obvious dynamic. On the margins of the locker room, other young men were engaged in conversations that were very different from the dominant conversation at the center of the group. These men were speaking in hushed tones, usually in dyads, and were clearly not projecting a performance that was intended to be public. And the topics of their talks were not of competition and sexual conquest of women; rather, they were speaking to each other about personal issues, problems, even insecurities about dating or relationships with girlfriends. These conversations remain marginal, quiet, and private—in contrast with the loud, public, central conversation—partly because boys and young men have had the experience of being (or seeing other boys) humiliated in male groups for expressing vulnerability or for expressing care for a particular girl.²⁶ The main policing mechanisms used to enforce consent with the dominant conversation are misogyny and homophobia: boys and men who reveal themselves as vulnerable are subsequently targeted as the symbolic “women,” “pussies,” and “faggots” on athletic teams (and, indeed, in many other male groups). In fact, it is a key part of the group process of dominance bonding that one or more members of the male group are made into the symbolic debased and degraded feminized “other” through which the group members bond and feel that their status as “men” is safely ensured. Most boys learn early to avoid at all costs offering one's self up as a target for this kind of abuse.²⁷ The power of this group dynamic was illustrated in an interview I conducted with a former world-class athlete who, during his athletic career, had been a closeted gay man. One of the best ways that he found to keep his sexual identity secret within this aggressively homophobic world was to participate in what he called “locker room garbage” talk about sexual conquests of women.²⁸

Curry's descriptions of the dominant, central conversation and the marginal, quiet conversations in the locker room are remarkably similar

to Lefkowitz's description of how the Glen Ridge boys set up their gang rape. In both cases, a small minority of high-status young men staged an aggressive, violently misogynist performance at the center of the room. I sketch out this internal dynamic of the athletic male peer group in Figure 3.

1. *Leaders*: At the center of the athletic male peer group are the highest-status boys and young men. They are the members of the group who most actively conform to and directly benefit from hegemonic masculinity. Their performances (from homophobic and misogynist verbal sparring, teasing, or bullying vulnerable boys, to hazing younger athletes, to actual sexual assaults of girls or other boys) involve directing their aggression toward debased feminized objects of sexual conquest.
2. *Audience*: Closely connected to the center, another group of boys constitutes itself as an adoring, cheering audience that directly supports and validates the hegemony of the central performance of the leaders. The gaze of these boys is directed inward, toward the group's center, to which they are erotically attached. They are

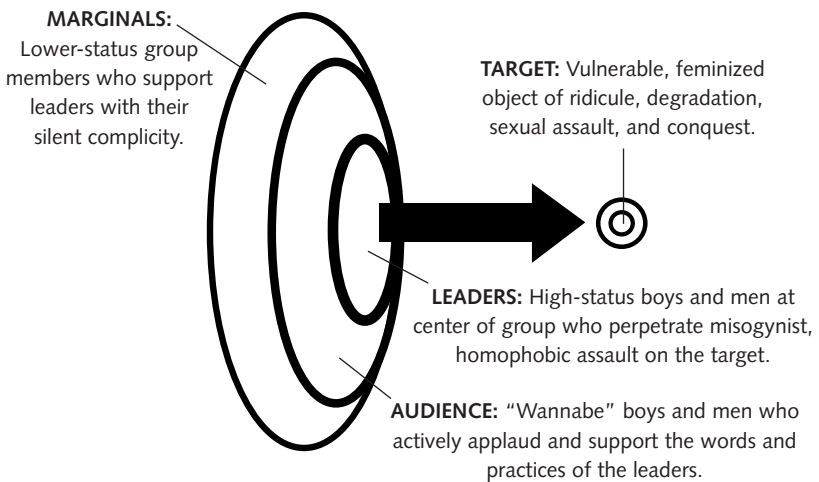


Figure 3. Dynamics of the athletic male peer group.

similar to what Adler and Adler call “wannabes”:²⁹ though not central in the group’s status hierarchy, these boys hope desperately to belong, to share in the benefits and pleasures of hegemonic masculinity, and to avoid the pain of becoming the object of the group’s put-downs.

3. *Marginals*: Further out, at the margins of the group, are other boys and young men, whispering to each other in quiet dyads. They are perhaps not fully comfortable with the words and actions at the center of the group. They may experience empathy with the victims of the group’s jokes and assaults. And they may at times, out of discomfort, opt out of some of the group’s more cruel activities. However, they may also feel a powerful, magnetic pull toward the erotic dominance bonding at the group’s center. After all, this is the place where these boys have experienced some acceptance and belonging. And their association with this group brings a certain level of respect from outsiders. Moreover, they know that silence will keep them safely in the group.

The active support of the audience and the compliant silence of the marginals make these two groups complicit in constituting the center as a high-status site of homophobic and misogynist domination. Indeed, the center would not be the center without the active support of the audience and the silent complicity of the outer circle of marginals.

What keeps those at the margins of the peer group silent? Partly, it’s fear. One fifth-grade boy told Adler and Adler that he compliantly goes with the flow when high-status kids pick on his friends: “It’s a real risk if you want to try to stick up for someone because you could get rejected from the group or whatever.”³⁰ According to Katherine Farr, sexually aggressive banter in groups provides a means of “dominance bonding” for young males.³¹ Internal hierarchies are constructed and contested as the boys and young men simultaneously mark the boundaries where the in-group ends and the realm of “outsiders” (women, gay men, non-athlete men, etc.) begins. I speculated in chapter 1 how a member of the boys’ Sea Monsters team might have felt compelled to ignore his inner

desire to join the Barbie Girls' celebration and instead joined in his peers' denunciation of the girls. Similarly, when a marginal young man does not feel comfortable with the dominant locker room conversation or with his teammates' gang rape of a girl or young woman, he knows that to speak out against these actions would be to risk severing his already tenuous connection to the group's center, a social location of power and status.

But it's not simply fear that keeps marginal boys in silent complicity with the group's practices. It's also pleasure. The bonds of the male peer group often have a decidedly erotic base, as Peter Lyman's research on sexual joking among fraternity members illustrates.³² To say that male groups' dominance bonding is erotic is not to say necessarily that men's bonds in sports are simply a means of sublimating a desire to have sex with each other. Undoubtedly, that is true with some boys and men, for whom sports are experienced as a "heterosexualization process," in which same-sex desire is repressed, perhaps sublimated into aggression, and eventually converted to sexual desire for women.³³ Some might speculate that this same-sex desire remains submerged in the unconscious of young men who self-define as "100 percent heterosexual." Whether it does or not, the erotic bond among male athletes tends to be overtly coded as fiercely heterosexual. Boys and men learn to bond with each other through sexually aggressive, erotically exciting talk that serves to forge an aggressive, even violent, hierarchical ordering of bodies, both inside the male peer group and between the male peer group and any other group. To thwart the dominant modes of one's peer group, then, is not simply to risk ridicule and ostracism; it also threatens to undermine the major way that a young male has learned to experience erotic excitement and pleasure with his peers.

"Voyeuring": Women as Objects of Conquest

By the time they were teens, the "jocks" of Glen Ridge used more than talk for their erotic dominance bonding. When parents were away, they would sometimes gather together in a home to watch pornographic films and masturbate together. The next step was the development of a group

form of entertainment that they called voyeuring, whereby a plan would be made for one guy at a party to “convince a girl to go upstairs to a bedroom for a sexual encounter.” But first, “his buddies would go up and hide in a closet, under the bed, or behind a door,” where they could watch. Sex with a girl, for these guys, was less an intimate encounter with a valued human being than it was the use of a woman’s body as a sexual performance for one’s male buddies. It was, in Lefkowitz’s words, “a way for these guys to create their own porn movie.”³⁴ Voyeuring was not invented in Glen Ridge. An informant told Tim Curry, in his study of a sports bar frequented by college athletes, that

an athlete who succeeded in picking up a date would escort her back to the apartment, where some of his teammates would be sitting on the couch waiting to see if anyone scored. If the young woman were a stranger rather than the athlete’s regular girlfriend, they would head upstairs at the first opportunity. They would hide in the athlete’s room or go to the roof, where they could look into the bedroom through a skylight. The “game” was to get the woman into the upstairs bedroom and into bed and let the other athletes watch the sexual activity take place.³⁵

Similarly, the California white high school footballers known as the Spur Posse had multiple sexual encounters with girls and young women as a competition among the boys to see who could “score” the most times. Significantly, it was the competitive talk and recapitulation of the conquest among the boys, not sex with the girls, that seemed to be the major driving force in their pursuit of this scoring.³⁶ In 2001, a case of voyeuring by male athletes came to light in a Maryland high school. While having sex with a fifteen-year-old girl, a sixteen-year-old lacrosse player secretly filmed the sex act and then later showed the film to his teammates.³⁷

Men’s use of female bodies to bond with each other is central to the dynamic of gang rape. Anthropologist Peggy Sanday and others who have studied gang rape are careful to argue that, from the point of view of the woman, the rape is not a sexual experience; rather, it is a violent,

degrading, and painful assault against one's body. However, from the point of view of perpetrators, there certainly *is* a sexual dynamic at work in gang rapes. But it is not sex with a woman happening here; rather, the male group uses the debased, violated woman's body as an object through which to have sex with each other.³⁸ In short, the dynamic underlying gang rapes is a statement of group-based male power, expressed through a dual process of misogynist denigration of women and erotic bonding among men, and this process has its roots in the erotic bonding of the misogynist joking culture of athletic teams.

A key to understanding male groups' use of women's bodies through which to erotically bond with each other is that most heterosexual boys and young men go through a period of intense insecurity and even discomfort in learning to establish sexual relations with girls and women. Men who were former athletes reported to me retrospectively that in high school, and even for some in college, talking with girls and women raised intense anxieties and feelings of inadequacy.³⁹ These young men dealt with their feelings of "lameness" with young women primarily by listening to and watching their male peers deliver a "rap" to women. As the men immersed themselves in this peer pedagogy of heterosexual relations, they learned to put on a performance for girls that, surprisingly for some of them, seemed to "work." The successful utilization of this learned dramaturgy of the heterosexual come-on allowed a young man to mask, even overcome, his sense of insecurity and lameness in his own eyes and, just as important, in the eyes of his male teammates. It also intensified, at a deep psychological level, his adherence to the group process of erotic dominance bonding with other members of his male peer group through collectively constructing women as objects of conquest.

When I was a freshman in college, as a "marginal" member of my community college basketball team, I experienced this peer group dynamic directly.⁴⁰ After having been a reasonably good high school player, I found myself at the bottom of the totem pole, thirteenth on a thirteen-player college team. Moreover, off the court, I could not hold my own in the competitive sexual banter. Early in the season, on a road

trip, the guys lounged around in a motel room, talking and joking about sex. Drew, our starting center and one of the highest-status guys on the team, noticed that Rob (another marginal player) and I had not been contributing anything to the raucous chronicling of the team's sexual exploits. "Hey, Robby T., hey Mess," Drew asked, "you guys ever had a piece of ass?" A virgin with little to brag about, I tensed up. I knew that Kess, another reserve player on the team, had recently been labeled the team fag after he had refused to jump into the middle of a brawl we had had against another team. I wanted to avoid becoming such a target of joking put-downs, so I employed what I thought was a subtle strategy. "Naw," I replied, but with diverted eyes and a knowing smile that I hoped would suggest that I was simply too cool to brag about sex with my girlfriend, a high school girl. Rob followed the same strategy. Drew, missing the subtleties, clobbered us: "Wow! We got two virgins on this team! We can't have that! Mess, Robby T., we gotta get you laid, and soon! We can't go having any virgins on this team. Havin' Kess is bad enough!"

A couple of weeks later, Drew invited us to a party. Robby T. and I showed up together, with our six-packs of beer. Soon, Drew announced to Rob and me loudly, "Hey, you two virgins ain't gonna be virgins after tonight, eh?" Not knowing what he was talking about, we just agreed and laughed, "Sure, Drew. We're just trying to figure out who we're going to lay tonight." Drew replied, "Man, you don't have to worry about that, because me and the guys have that taken care of. We got a lady comin' over here in a couple of hours. She's real special, and since you guys are the only two virgins on the team, you get to go first." As I felt my palms get sweaty, I knew I was supposed to act grateful. "Wow, Drew. Like, is she some kind of prostitute or something?" Drew smiled. "You could say that. She's kind of a friend of mine, you know?" He laughed loud and hard, and so did we. I took some long pulls on my beer, drained it, and opened another one. I whispered to Robby T., "Let's get the hell out of here," and we escaped out the back door.

Rob and I never did find out whether Drew was serious about his plan to get us laid, or if the guys were just pulling a joke on the two

lower-status guys on the team. We felt a bit ashamed of ourselves for leaving the party, and we knew that doing so did nothing to enhance our already marginal status on the team. So we decided that the only way to handle the guys when we next saw them was to tell them a lie: We were now laying our girlfriends and just couldn't do it with someone else because we wanted to be faithful. That's how we escaped being put in the "fag bag" with Kess. We were accepted now; we had learned how to bullshit with the best of them.

But the story did not end there. After this embarrassing incident, I began to step up the pressure on my girlfriend to "put out." Like many young men, I wanted to have sex. But the urgency of my desire was not driven simply by my attraction to my girlfriend. I genuinely and desperately wanted access to the sexual experience and knowledge that would put me on a par with the guys on the team. Fortunately, my girlfriend had a mind of her own and asserted her own timetable on what we would do and when we would do it. However, I can see in retrospect how my experiences with my teammates had created fear, embarrassment, and frustration over my "virgin status" and that this in turn had encouraged a tendency to see and treat my girlfriend more as an object of conquest than as a person with feelings, fears, and desires of her own. More generally, this experience eventually helped me to understand how the athletic male peer groups' voyeurizing—their tendencies to bond by watching each other have sex or by listening to each other talk about sex—don't end up only in gang rapes. This group dynamic can also feed the seemingly more private, one-on-one dynamic of date and acquaintance rape, even among young men who are marginal to the athletic peer group.⁴¹

Women's Sexual Agency

As my story suggests, the idea that male peer-group dynamics create women as objects of sexual conquest oversimplifies a more complex relational dynamic between women and men. After all, though I had begun to pressure my girlfriend in order to gain status with my male peers, she did not become a passive object of my actions and desires. She retained,

expressed, and asserted her subjectivity in this situation. And in fact, when I talk with college male athletes these days, their descriptions of their relations with women are anything but descriptions of passive objects. Jeffrey Benedict, in his book *Athletes and Acquaintance Rape*, argues that high-status male college and professional athletes learn to take for granted that some women will seek out sex with them. This interactional dynamic, which Benedict calls the “jock-groupie tango,” tends to socialize many male athletes to “an image of women as sexually compliant. The sex-for-fame commerce that exists between athletes and groupies undermines and trivializes the fundamental component of consent.”⁴²

Rather than simply seeing acquaintance rape by athletes as a result of objectification dynamics emanating from within the male peer group, Benedict paints a more complex picture. He argues that there is a subculture of sexually assertive and active women and men in sports, and he points to women’s agency in this sexual dynamic. Some antirape activists and feminists may blanch at Benedict’s discussion of the ways that women’s “complicity reinforces the athletes’ attitude of sexual license,”⁴³ fearing that this perspective will fuel the blame-the-victim mentality that is so common in discussions of the women who are raped by male athletes. There is a fine line to be navigated here: On the one hand, acknowledging women’s agency in a relational sexual dynamic with men athletes risks letting men off the hook and, once again, blaming women for men’s acts of sexual violence. On the other hand, ignoring women’s agency risks academic complicity in the construction of women as passive sexual objects. A key, I think, to understanding the complexity of this situation lies in viewing both women’s and men’s sexual agencies as embedded in unequal power relations.

Anybody who does any work with male athletes around issues of sexuality and rape knows that some men athletes do objectify women as targets of sexual conquest and often uncritically internalize rape myths. When once conducting a workshop on sex for a college football team with my colleague Mark Stevens, we asked the players, “When you are in the early stages of sex with a woman, how do you know when you have

her consent to move ahead?” After a moment or two of nervous giggling, one man, apparently quite seriously, offered this answer: “If she’s wet, then she wants it.” The room erupted in raucous laughter and agreement. Mark Stevens went on to challenge this belief, explaining that there can be an important distinction between bodily responses to physical stimulation and agreement to proceed to other forms or levels of sexual involvement. Heavy breathing, enthusiastic kissing, or even apparent genital lubrication on the woman’s part do not necessarily imply consent to go further.

That some of these guys apparently saw sexual encounters with women as moments of physical manipulation of women’s bodies to achieve a goal lends credence to the notion that they have learned to treat women as objects.⁴⁴ But when we listen to what these young men have to say, we also find that they often experience some women as sexually aggressive and even powerful. Women, they say, have tremendous control over sexual situations through their ability to manipulate men with their sexual attractiveness and their ability to say no or, more commonly, to give ambiguous sexual messages. In his workshops with college athletes, Mark Stevens introduces the metaphor of a traffic light to begin a discussion of consent. He first asks the men how they respond as drivers to red, yellow, and green lights. The men respond that they always know what to do with a red or a green light, but when approaching a yellow light, there is often a moment of confusion, usually followed by their speeding up rather than slowing down. Sexual encounters with women, the men say, are far too often experienced as yellow lights, with mixed messages abounding. Stevens extends the metaphor by explaining that a sexual encounter is also very much like an intersection, ripe with both excitement and danger, so a “yellow light” should be a sign that danger looms and that one should slow down, show caution.

When these men get a yellow light from a woman, they are not experiencing a passive female sexual object; rather, they are grappling with the active sexual agency of a woman (albeit agency that might be every bit as confused and as poorly communicated as his). These men are operating from an assumption that they, as men, should be *in control*—of

their sexual partners, of the situation, of themselves. However, their sexual experiences are likely to be confusing, raising anxieties about their own lack of control and leading to an exaggerated sense of women's sexual power over them.⁴⁵ One response to this confusion during a sexual encounter is for the man to revert to an internalized sexual script, which often contains elements of rape myths ("If she's wet, she wants it"). Tim Beneke, in his book *Proving Manhood*, offers the insight that rather than simply defining women as passive objects, men more often tend to project a sexual subjectivity onto women—a subjectivity of desire and lust for "me."⁴⁶

Sometimes, though, male athletes don't have to project an imagined sexual subjectivity onto women. Gail McKabe studied the dynamic between Canadian male Major Junior Hockey players (fifteen- to twenty-year-old elite athletes) and the women who self-identify as "puck bunnies" and aggressively seek out sexual liaisons with the jocks.⁴⁷ McKabe says that the puck bunnies are "relentless in their pursuit of the jock." These young women say they are "proud as punch" to have sex with the jock, because this will "entitle the puck bunny to 'bragging rights'" through their affiliation with the high-status jocks. The male jocks are often happy to have sex with the puck bunnies and even see it as "tangible evidence of their celebrity status." However, in a crude derivation of the madonna/whore dichotomy, the jocks tend to define the puck bunnies as "the dirties" and place them in opposition to girlfriends, with whom they expect to have broader and longer-term relationships. McKabe's research suggests a complex dynamic. Both the male jocks and the female puck bunnies are active agents in what McKabe describes as a group-based "cultural negotiation." Put another way, both the young men and the young women are simultaneously objects (of each other's desires and actions) *and* active subjects. However, this negotiation takes place in a decidedly asymmetrical context with respect to gender and social status. The puck bunnies' agency—their active attempts to gain status through sexual affiliation with the high-status males—may be viewed as a way of resisting the gender and age constraints they face in their communities. However, the jocks have direct access to their own

social status as respected and revered male ice hockey players, and this asymmetry serves ultimately to advantage them and to disadvantage the degraded “dirties” whose “bragging rights” are short lived. The agency of both groups ultimately, then, reproduces the asymmetrically gendered context.

Suppression of Empathy

A key part of the process of learning to treat a person of a particular group as an object of conquest is the suppression of empathy for such a person. But boys and men have mothers, sisters, female cousins, and friends whom they know as people and whom they are taught to “protect” and care for. How then can they conjure up the emotional distance to be able to sexually assault women? Cross-cultural research on rape has pointed to the importance of the degree and type of contact that boys and men have with girls and women as a variable that correlates with varying rates of rape. Rape rates tend to be higher in societies with rigid divisions of labor and spatial separation between the sexes, especially where these divisions are marked by male dominance and female subordination.⁴⁸ Homosocial bonding among men, especially when the bond is of the sort of sexualized dominance bonding that I discussed above, is a very poor environment for the development of empathy (or respect) for women.

Consistent with this, Lefkowitz notes that the boys who were most central in the actual assault in the Glen Ridge rape grew up without sisters, in families that were headed by domineering male figures. Moreover, their peer group, family, and community experiences taught them that boys’ and men’s activities were most valued, and girls’ and women’s were of secondary importance. “The immediate environment,” Lefkowitz argues, “did not cultivate great empathy for women.”⁴⁹ Contrarily, some of the boys who left the scene and felt “uncomfortable” with the assault seemed more open to seeing the pain in the victim’s eyes and were thus less able to suppress their empathy for the victim. Most of these boys, Lefkowitz observes, grew up in homes with sisters.

Male Athletes' Culture of Silence

A question that plagued Lefkowitz in his description of the Glen Ridge rape was why the six boys who left the scene remained complicit in their silence, both the day of the rape and during the subsequent years of litigation. At least some of these young men were very uncomfortable with what happened, even thought it was wrong, but nobody in the group raised a hand or voice to stop it. Two other young men did, however. The case broke when another male athlete, who had not been at the scene of the assault, reported to teachers that he had overheard other guys laughing and bragging about the rape. Significantly, this African American young man who blew the whistle had always felt himself to be excluded from the tightly knit, high-status clique of white athletes. The second boy, who became an activist in the school and community in his quest to see that the jocks did not get away with their crime, was a long-haired “Gigger” (a term used to identify the small minority of radical, artsy, anti-jock students at the school). Both of these boys—one an athlete, one not—were outsiders to the dominant athletic male peer group. Those inside, even those who were marginal within the group, maintained a complicit silence that enabled the minority to assault their victim.

This culture of silence is built into the dynamics of the group's spoken and unspoken codes and rituals. The eroticized dominance bond has already established that “the guys” are part of a high-status, privileged in-group (and very little during adolescence can solidify this sort of feeling as much as being part of an athletic team). Others—nonathlete boys, racial and ethnic minority boys, girls, parents, teachers, police, and so on—are outsiders. Years of experience within the group have taught these boys that they will be rewarded for remaining complicit with the code of silence and punished for betraying the group. They know that a whistle-blower might be banished from the group and possibly also beaten up. Or he might remain in the group, but now with the status of the degraded, feminized “faggot” who betrayed the “men” in the group.

Men's Violence against Other Men

In February 2000, a professional basketball player with the San Antonio Spurs, Sean Elliott, announced his impending return to play following a life-threatening illness that resulted in a kidney transplant. Elliott's return was met with considerable media discussion and debate about whether it was appropriate for him to return to play at all, given the grave risks he might face should he receive a blow to his kidney. Lakers star Kobe Bryant, when asked how he would respond to playing against Elliott, said, "As soon as he steps on the court, that means he's healthy. I'll have no problem putting an elbow in his gut."⁵⁰ This statement spoke to the routine nature of bodily contact and aggression in basketball. Players and coaches know that in order to be competitive enough to win, they will need to "put their bodies on" opposing players in ways that could cause bodily harm. In football and ice hockey, the overt aggression against other players is even more intense. One former National Football League player told me that before a playoff game, his coach implored his defensive players to hurt the opposing star running back if they had an opportunity to do it. This is apparently not that unusual. A 1998 *Sports Illustrated* cover story on "the NFL's dirtiest players" admirably described San Francisco 49ers guard Kevin Gogan's tendencies, sometimes even after a play has been whistled dead, to "punch, kick, trip, cut-block, sit on or attempt to neuter the man lined up across from him." Gogan's coach, Steve Mariuchi, expressed his approval: "Coaches want tough guys, players who love to hit and fly around and do things that are mean and nasty. Not everyone can be like that, but if you can have one or two players who are a little overaggressive, that's great."⁵¹

Bodily aggression toward opponents on the field or court, whether of the "routine" kind that takes place within the rules or of the "dirty" illegal kind that aims to injure an opponent, is often assumed to end when the players cross the boundaries back into the "real world." The story of the "gentle giant" football player who growls, curses, and tears opponents limb-from-limb on the field but is a kind and caring teddy bear off the field is part of our national lore. But is aggression on the field against other men related to aggression off the field? Former Dallas

Cowboy football star John Niland now says that he and many of his former teammates were involved in drugs, alcohol, and spouse abuse:

I'm not going to name names, but my wife at the time knew of other wives who were abused. . . . We're paid to be violent. We're paid to beat up on the guy across from you. When you're in the game and your emotions are so high and the aura of the whole environment is so unbelievable. When the game's over, technically, it's to be turned off. But you can't. . . . Quite frankly, if you got every player who did drugs or alcohol or played stoned or who was a spousal abuser, you couldn't field an NFL team. It's still going on.⁵²

And consider a comment by NBA coach Pat Riley, of the Miami Heat. Bemoaning an unusually long break between his team's playoff games, Riley said, "Several days between games allows a player to become a person. During the playoffs, you don't want players to be people."⁵³ If it is acknowledged that the supposedly civilizing influences of a player's life outside sports can (negatively!) humanize him, then doesn't it follow that it might also work the other way—that dehumanizing attitudes and experiences within sports might spill over into life outside sports? Indeed, sport studies scholars have found evidence that points to this conclusion. Jeffrey Segrave and his colleagues found that Canadian minor league (fifteen- and sixteen-year-old) ice hockey players were more likely than nonathletes to engage in physically violent acts of delinquency.⁵⁴ And sociologist Howard Nixon found that male athletes in team contact sports, especially if they reported having intentionally hurt other athletes on the field, were more likely to hurt others outside sports.⁵⁵ To understand this connection, it is necessary to look more closely at the ways that boys and men develop their identities and relationships within the culture of sport.

Boys' Embodiments of Toughness

In an earlier book, *Power at Play*, I explored the meanings of athletic participation through life-history interviews with male former athletes.

One man, a former NFL defensive back who had been known and rewarded for his fierce and violent “hits,” had injured many opposing players in his career, some seriously. I asked him to describe how he felt the first times he had hurt someone on a football field, and he said that hitting and hurting people had bothered him at first:

When I first started playing, if I would hit a guy hard and he wouldn't get up, it would bother me. [But] when I was a sophomore in high school, first game, I knocked out two quarterbacks, and people loved it. The coach loved it. Everybody loved it. You never stop feeling sorry for [your injured opponent]. If somebody doesn't get up, you want him to get up. You hope the wind's just knocked out of him or something. The more you play, though, the more you realize that it is just a part of the game—somebody's gonna get hurt. It could be you, it could be him—most of the time it's better if it's him. So, you know, you just go out and play your game.⁵⁶

This statement describes a contextual normalization of violence: “you realize it is just a part of the game.” It also illustrates an emotional process, a group-based suppression of empathy for the pain and injury that one might cause one's opponent. Most children are taught that it is unacceptable to hurt other people. In order to get athletes (or soldiers) to be willing and able to inflict harm on others, the opponent must be objectified as the enemy, and the situation must be defined as “either him or me”: “somebody's gonna get hurt. It could be you, it could be him—most of the time it's better if it's him.” The most obvious force behind this suppression of empathy is the rewards one gets for the successful utilization of violence: “The coach loved it. Everybody loved it.” And it's not just this sort of immediate positive reinforcement. The man quoted above, for instance, received a college scholarship, all-America honors, and eventually all-pro status in the NFL.

But rewards do not tell the whole story behind athletes' suppression of empathy for their opponents. In fact, when I probed athletes' early experiences and motivations in sports, I found stories not of victories, trophies, and public adulation. Instead, these men were more likely

to drop into stories of early connection with others, especially fathers, older brothers, uncles, and eventually same-aged male peers. Some found sports to be the primary, sometimes the *only*, site in which they experienced connection with their otherwise emotionally or physically absent fathers. Many also said that they felt alone, unsure of themselves, cut off from others and that it was through sports participation, especially for those who had some early successes and received attention for these successes, that they found acceptance.

Why sports? An important part of the answer is that most boys' early experiences teach them to appear to be invulnerable. This means, don't show any fear or weakness. And little boys begin to learn this at a very young age. Learning to embody and display toughness, even if it is a veneer that covers up a quivering insecurity inside, can be a survival skill that helps boys stay safe in a hostile environment. In his eloquent description of street life for African American boys in poor communities, Geoffrey Canada describes how learning to fight, or at least displaying an attitude that you are ready and willing to fight, was necessary. Losing a fight, and "taking it like a man," was far better (and ultimately *safer*) than being labeled a coward.⁵⁷ Learning early to mask one's vulnerability behind displays of toughness may help boys survive on the street, but it can also contribute to boys (and, later, men) having difficulties in developing and maintaining emotional connection with others. Though in an emotional straitjacket, boys and men retain a human need to connect with others. And for those who have some early athletic successes, sports can become an especially salient context in which to receive a certain kind of closeness with others.⁵⁸

A key, then, to understanding male athletes' commitment to athletic careers lies in understanding their underlying need for connection with other people and the ways that society thwarts emotional connection for boys. And there is often an additional layer of emotional salience to sports participation for boys and men from poor and ethnic minority backgrounds. African American men, in particular, when asked about their early motivations in sports, were far more likely to drop into a discussion of "respect" than other men were. Early sports successes, for them,

offered the discovery of a group context in which they could earn the respect of family members, friends, schoolmates, and communities. White middle-class men in my study did not talk about the importance of respect in the same way. This is because African American boys and young men are far more likely to face a daily experience of being *suspected* (of a potential crime of violence, of shoplifting in a store, of cheating on an exam, etc.) than of being *respected*. Schools are a major source of African American boys' experience of disrespect. Sociologist Ann Arnett Ferguson observes that elementary school teachers and administrators often treat African American boys as "troublemakers" who are already "beyond redemption."⁵⁹ By contrast, most white middle-class boys and men begin each day and enter each situation with a certain baseline, taken-for-granted level of respect that includes an assumption of our competence and trustworthiness, which is then ours to lose. To receive the benefits of this baseline of respect, we simply have to show up. This respect is not earned; rather, it is an unacknowledged but very real benefit that Peggy MacIntosh has called "the invisible Knapsack of White Privilege."⁶⁰

In short, boys' relational capacities and opportunities for expressions of emotional vulnerability tend to be thwarted and suppressed. Some boys find in their early athletic experiences that sports offer them a context in which they can connect emotionally and gain the respect of others. Ironically though, as one moves further away from the playful experiences of childhood into the competitive, routinized institutional context of athletic careers, one learns that in order to continue to receive approval and respect, one must be a winner. And to be a winner, you must be ready and willing to suppress your empathy for other athletes. In the context of sports careers, you do not experience your body as a means of connecting intimately with others; rather, your body becomes a weapon, which you train to defeat an objectified, dehumanized opponent.⁶¹ It's a dog-eat-dog world out there; you gotta have that killer instinct.

Booze, Bonding, and Fighting

The lessons learned on the field are important, but athletes also spend large amounts of time not playing sports—in classrooms, at parties, and

at other social events with friends. And the kinds of relational patterns that boys and men learn on athletic teams sometimes spill over into these nonsport contexts. Timothy Curry found that college male athletes described life at the campus bar as one of “drinking, picking up women, and getting into fights”:

... the athletes would try to “own” every bar they frequented. Often, this meant staging bar fights to demonstrate their power. Several of the athletes were good fighters, and they were typically the ones to start the fight. Often, these fighters would pick out a particular victim based on the fact that he looked “queer.” The victim need not do anything provocative—sometimes victims were chosen because “they didn’t want to fight.” After the first punch was thrown, others in the group would enter in, either throwing punches of their own or attempting to break up the fight. The team always backed up its most aggressive members, so that the victim seldom had much of a chance.⁶²

Since the athletes were of such high status, Curry explains, they rarely got into any trouble from this fighting. Instead, most often the victim was thrown out of the bar by the bouncer, and the players would be given free drinks from the bartender and would celebrate their “victory” as “a way of building team cohesion and expressing masculine courage.”⁶³ Alcohol consumption is obviously a key part of this process.⁶⁴ The athletes would compete among themselves to see who could consume the most free (or nearly free) drinks at the bar. The heavy drinking, an athlete told Curry, is “to prove you’re not a pussy.”⁶⁵

Curry’s description of the sports bar scene mirrors the interactional dynamics of male peer groups that I described earlier concerning violence against women. In the sports bar, we see a premeditated incident of violence, staged to build in-group cohesion (albeit this time in a public place, with a male victim). The victim is a vulnerable-looking man, who is degraded by the group as looking “queer.” As a result, the line between “the men,” who are inside the group, and others outside the group, be they “queers” or women who are marked for later sexual

conquest, is created and reinforced both by the collective act of violence and by the public approval it receives.

This sort of homophobic bullying of nonathlete boys is also a common occurrence on high school and college campuses. A window was opened on this dynamic in 1999, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, armed to the teeth, entered Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado, and proceeded to kill thirteen and wound twenty-one of their schoolmates and teachers. “All jocks stand up,” the killers yelled when they began their slaughter. “Anybody with a white hat or a shirt with a sports emblem on it is dead.”⁶⁶ Much of the aftermath of this tragedy consisted of media and experts discussing the origins of the anger and violence expressed by the two boys, dubbed “the trenchcoat mafia,” and how in the future to predict and prevent such individuals from violently “going off.” Very little discussion centered on the ways that such outsider boys are so commonly targeted as the “nerds” and symbolic “pussies” that serve as the foil for high-status athletes’ construction of their own in-group status. Indeed, Columbine High School was like many other high schools in this regard. There was a “tough little group” of about seven guys, mostly football players and wrestlers, who were known for leading painfully degrading hazing rites among younger male athletes, for harassing and physically abusing girls, for destroying property, and basically getting away with it all. They also abused the outsider boys in the “trenchcoat mafia,” one of whom was shoved into a locker by three football players who taunted him, “Fag, what are you looking at?”

Homophobic taunting and bullying does not always result in such serious physical violence.⁶⁷ But it is a common part of the central dynamic of male peer groups. The role homophobia plays within male peer groups is akin to Elmer’s glue being used to bond two pieces of wood. Once the white glue is dried, it becomes clear, nearly invisible, and it acts simultaneously (and paradoxically) as a bond that holds the two pieces of wood together and as an invisible barrier, or shield, that keeps the two pieces of wood from actually touching each other. Homophobia works the same way. While it bonds boys together as part of the

in-group (we are men, they are faggots), it also places clear limits on the extent to which boys and men can make themselves vulnerable to one another (don't get too close, emotionally or physically, or you will make yourself vulnerable). And this, again, is where alcohol often comes in. While it is part of the system of competitive status-enhancement to drink a lot of alcohol, young men also find that one of the short-term benefits of drinking with the guys is that it loosens the constraints on verbal and emotional expression.⁶⁸ The key desires underlying boys' and men's affiliations with each other—acceptance, emotional connection, respect—seem more accessible after a few drinks. The constraints normally placed around expressions of physical closeness among men are often relaxed after a few drinks; the arms draped around a teammate's shoulders and the “I love you, man” expression can be conveniently forgotten in the fog of tomorrow's hangover.

In sum, boys in central, aggressive team sports learn early to use their bodies as weapons against an objectified opponent. The empathy that one might be expected to feel for the victim of one's punches, hits, or tackles is suppressed by the experience of being rewarded (with status and prestige, and also with connection and respect) for the successful utilization of one's body against other men. Empathy for one's opponent is also suppressed through the shared contextual ethic that injury is an expected part of the game. These on-the-field values and practices are mutually constitutive of the off-the-field peer group dynamics, whereby the boundaries of the in-group are constructed through homophobia and violence directed (verbally and sometimes physically) against boys and men who are outside the group.

Male Athletes' Violence against Themselves

In June 2000, future Hall of Fame quarterback Steve Young ended several months of speculation by announcing his retirement after fifteen years of professional football. Actually, he had played his last down of football ten months earlier, when a “knock out” hit by an opposing player caused Young's fourth concussion in three years. “I'll miss many things,” said Young. “What I won't miss are the hits that made my body

tingle.”⁶⁹ Young’s announcement was not surprising. In fact, many had wondered why it took him so long to retire, given the mounting evidence concerning the dangerous cumulative effects of head injuries.⁷⁰ But Young’s desire to continue playing must be seen in the context of an entire career in which he was rewarded for taking tremendous risks on the football field, playing hurt and with reckless abandon. Steve Young is not unusual in this respect. In November 2000, Denver Broncos quarterback Brian Griese suffered a shoulder separation in the first half of the game. Told by team doctors that he had a third-degree separation, the most severe type, he took a painkilling injection and returned to the game to lead his team to victory.

Football players live with the knowledge that small and moderate injuries are an expected outcome of the game and that a serious, career-ending or even life-threatening injury is always a possibility. Indeed, during the 1999 NFL season, 364 injuries were serious enough for a player to miss at least one game. Knee injuries (122) and ankle injuries (52) were the most common. Eleven were concussions.⁷¹ In U.S. high schools, by far the greatest number of fatal, disabling, and serious sports injuries are suffered by football players (though the injury rates per hundred thousand participants are actually higher in ice hockey and gymnastics).⁷² Among children, falls and sports-related injuries are now the leading causes of hospital stays and emergency room visits.⁷³ A survey of hospital emergency rooms and medical clinics in 1997 found a staggering number of sports injuries among U.S. children fourteen years old and under, led by bicycling (901,716 injuries), basketball (574,434), football (448,244), baseball (252,665), and soccer (227,157).⁷⁴ In Canada, injuries—a substantial proportion of which are head, neck, and cervical spinal injuries—among children ice hockey players are also escalating.⁷⁵

The Body as Machine

Several years ago, I was watching a football game on television with a friend at his house. A big fan, he knew that his team had to win this game to secure home field advantage for the playoffs. Suddenly, the announcer

observed that a key player on my friend's team was hurt. The camera focused on the player, slowly walking off the field and looking at his hand with a puzzled look on his face. His index finger, it turned out, was dislocated and sticking out sideways at a ninety-degree angle. "Oh, good," my friend sighed in relief. "It's only his finger—he can still play." Indeed, a few plays later, the player was back on the field, his hand taped up (and presumably popped back into place by the trainer, and perhaps injected with painkiller). What struck me about this moment was how normal it seemed within the context of football. Announcers, coaches, other players, and fans like my friend all fully expected this man to "suck it up" and get back out there and play. We all have incredibly high expectations of football players' (and indeed, of other professional, college, and even high school athletes') willingness and ability to cope with pain, to play hurt, often risking their long-term health. Injuries and pain levels that in other contexts would result in emergency-room visits, home bed rest, and time off work or school are considered a normal part of the workday for many athletes.

I was struck by the depth to which athletes internalize these cultural standards to endure pain when I interviewed former athletes for *Power at Play*. One man, a former major league baseball player, described an incredible litany of injuries and rehabilitations that spanned not only the everyday aches and bruises that one would expect a catcher to endure but also year after year of ankle, knee, shoulder, neck, and spinal injuries that required several surgeries. In particular, he played out the second half of one season with daily injections of painkillers and cortisone in a shoulder that he knew would require surgery. Players routinely decide to "play hurt," to "give their bodies up for the team" in this way, even with the full knowledge that they are doing so at the risk of long-term disability. But when this man's eleven-year pro baseball career finally came to an end, he described it as a "shock. . . . I had felt that the way I had conditioned myself and taken care of myself that I would play until I was thirty-seven, thirty-eight."⁷⁶ Nobody could listen to this man's story and not agree that he had worked very hard and been very dedicated to his craft. But to describe the way he had lived his life as taking care of

himself seemed to me to express a particularly alienated relationship to his own body. He, like many other athletes, had a wide range of knowledge about his body. However, this self-knowledge was in some ways shallow; it was not an expansive sense of his body as a living organism, as a self that connects in healthy ways with others and with one's environment.⁷⁷ Rather, it was a self-knowledge firmly bounded within an instrumental view of one's body as a machine, or a tool, to be built, disciplined, used (and, if necessary, used up) to get a job done.

This kind of self-knowledge—what psychologist William Pollack calls the “hardening of boys”—starts early in life, especially for athletes.⁷⁸ Boys learn that to show pain and vulnerability risks their being seen as “soft,” and they know from the media, from coaches, and from their peers that this is a very bad thing. Instead, they learn that they can hope to gain access to high status, privilege, respect, and connection with others if they conform to what sociologist Don Sabo calls “the pain principle,” a cultural ideal that demands a suppression of self-empathy and a willingness to take pain and take risks.⁷⁹

Why are so many boys and men willing to take such risks? Again, we must look to the young male's embeddedness in social groups, and again, homophobia and misogyny are key enforcement mechanisms for conformity. The boy who whines about his pain and appears not to be willing to play hurt risks being positioned by the group as the symbolic “sissy” or “faggot” who won't “suck it up and take it like a man for the good of the team.” One man I interviewed, for instance, told me that in high school, when he decided not to play in a big game because of an injury, his coach accused him of faking it. And as he sat in the whirlpool nursing his injury, a teammate came in and yelled at him, “You fucking pussy!”⁸⁰ Canadian sport studies scholar Philip White and his colleagues cite a similar example of an ice hockey player who, returning to play after a serious knee injury, was told by teammates “not to ice the swelling and not to ‘be a pussy.’”⁸¹

The fear of being seen by the team as less than a man is not the only reason an athlete will play hurt, though. As pro football player Tim Green wrote in his illuminating book:

Doctors don't coerce players into going out on the field. They don't have to. Players have been conveniently conditioned their entire lives to take the pain and put bodies at risk. Players beg doctors for needles that numb and drugs that reduce swelling and pain. . . . Taking the needle is something NFL players are proud to have done. It is a badge of honor, not unlike the military's Purple Heart. It means you were in the middle of the action and you took a hit. Taking the needle in the NFL also lets everyone know that you'd do anything to play the game. It demonstrates a complete disregard for one's well-being that is admired in the NFL between players.⁸²

Green's statement—that demonstrating a complete disregard for one's well-being is so admired in the NFL among players—speaks volumes not just about the normalization of pain and injury in pro football but also about ways that bodily risk and endurance of pain serve as masculine performances that bring acceptance and respect among one's peers. Indeed, writing more generally about men's (often dangerous) health behaviors, Will Courtenay has argued that "health behaviors are used in daily interactions in the social structuring of gender and power. . . . The social practices that undermine men's health are often the signifiers of masculinity and the instruments that men use in the negotiation of social power and status."⁸³ In short, in the context of the athletic team, risking one's health by playing hurt is more than a way to avoid misogynist or homophobic ridicule; it is also a way of "performing" a highly honored form of masculinity.

There are concrete rewards—status, prestige, public adulation, scholarships, and even money—for men who are willing to pay the price. But we must also remember that underlying men's performances for each other is a powerful need to belong, to connect, to be respected. In refusing to play hurt, especially in the context of a team sport, a player risks losing the tenuous but powerful connection he has with the male group. Given both the negative enforcement mechanisms and the positive rewards a player might expect from choosing to play hurt, it should surprise us more when a player decides *not* to risk his long-term health, by refusing the needle, sitting down, and saying "no más."⁸⁴

Performing the Triad of Men's Violence

In this chapter, I have outlined the group-based, interactional processes underlying the triad of men's violence in sports: violence against women, against other men, and against their own bodies. All three are explicable outcomes of the common peer interactions and performances that emanate from the center of male athletic groups. A small group of high-status males at the center of these groups set the tone with misogynist and homophobic banter, teasing, and actions. Less central boys and men within the group, some of whom may feel uncomfortable with the group's dominant values and actions, still tend to actively support or passively go along with the group. The performances of hegemonic masculinity from the center, actively supported by the applause of the less central "audience" and passively supported by the complicit "marginals," go a long way toward explaining the routine production of the triad of men's violence in sports.

But how are these three kinds of violence connected? My analysis suggests two mutually intertwined clusters of group-based interactions that are powerful linking processes between these three otherwise seemingly separate phenomena: The first is *misogynist and homophobic talk and actions*. The athletic male peer group defines, enforces, and attempts to solidify its boundaries through aggressive misogynist and homophobic talk and actions. Boys and men learn to associate the group's sexual aggression paradoxically—as an exciting and pleasurable erotic bond that holds the group together (and places it above other groups) and as an ever-present threat of demasculinization, humiliation, ostracism, and even violence that may be perpetrated against a boy or man who fails to conform with the dominant group values and practices.

The second is *suppression of empathy*. Through athletic peer groups, boys and men learn to suppress their empathy toward women as objects of the group's humorous discourse and (at times) aggressive actions. One's own body becomes a sexual machine or weapon to be used in the conquest of a woman and as a display of heterosexual masculinity for one's male peers. Men also learn to suppress their empathy toward other men, both on and off the field, as "outsiders" and as enemies to be

defeated—through violence, if necessary. One's body is experienced as a weapon to be used to defeat an objectified opponent. And ultimately, the body-as-weapon comes back on the male athlete as an alien force: As the man learns to suppress his own self-empathy, to endure pain and injury to get a job done, his body is experienced not as a human self to be nurtured and cared for but as a machine or a tool to be used to get a job done.

Group-based interactions and performances are a powerful force in the day-to-day making and remaking of gender. However, as I noted in chapter 1, performances and group interactions are not free-floating. Rather, they take place in social contexts that are characterized by institutional rules, relations, and hierarchies as well as by cultural symbols. It is to an analysis of these institutional and cultural contexts that I turn in the next two chapters.