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### Striking Out Toxic Masculinity and Sexism in the Realm of Professional Sports

From Hail Mary passes to buzzer beaters, from underdog victories to championship dynasties, there is a unique magic to sports. As fans wait for puck drops and tip offs and ceremonial first pitches, people from all walks of life come together to cheer for their teams, unifying them in a way that only a stadium rife with electric excitement can. It is in that ability to bring people together that the glory of sports exists. Despite the willingness of sports buffs to toast to the success of their teams with overpriced Bud Lights and stadium nachos, that same camaraderie does not extend to careers in the professional sports industry. Although their support is welcome when they are buying tickets to games or jerseys for their sons and husbands, it has been made clear to women that their presence in the working world of sports is not desired. Why is that sexism runs rampant in an industry where success is reliant on indivisibility amongst teammates and fans alike? The answer is simple: masculinity.

Masculinity in the United States adheres to a strict set of guidelines that dictate everything from physical size to emotional expression (or lack thereof); failure to obey these guidelines means failure to be a man. From a young age, boys are encouraged to admire professional athletes who embody masculine ideals—men who are strong and rich and successful. As they grow up, boys learn to think of sports as their domain; when women express interest in entering the sports industry, men feel that they must protect their domain. It is the perceived need to uphold these toxic values that embolden men to try to exclude women from the

world of professional athletics. When attempts at exclusion fail, men harass and belittle women to send the message that there is no room for femininity in sports.

Before discussing the intricacies of how masculinity operates in the sports industry, it is pertinent to characterize the hallmarks of American masculinity. Masculinity is upheld by four pillars: physical size, professional success, emotional stoicism, and sexual prowess. Men are trained to believe that “masculinity and muscularity go hand in hand” (Stout 181) because of society’s preference “toward mesomorphic (muscular) males, and...aversion toward endomorphic (fat) and ectomorphic (thin) males” (Stout 176-177). This societal preference for men with a more powerful physique demonstrates a belief that men should be physically dominant; men who do not fit this mold are seen as inferior.

The idea that professional success reflects masculinity is rooted in the gender normative role of “breadwinner.” A recent study of heterosexual American couples conducted by the University of Bath shows that men become more stressed as their wives earn more than forty percent of the household income; men are most stressed when their wives are the sole breadwinners of the household. Dr. Joanna Syrda, the author of the study, asserts that these findings demonstrate “how strong and persistent...gender identity norms” are (“Husbands’ Stress Increases...”). Intrinsic to masculinity is the need to contribute more financially than a female counterpart. Professional success facilitates such an achievement, affirming masculinity in American men.

Emotional stoicism is perhaps the greatest measure of masculinity. Phrases like, “Man up!” and, “Be a man!” are uttered with such frequency and disdain that an emotion as universal as sadness is deemed too feminine. Boys equate expressions of sadness, like crying, with weakness and learn to replace that emotion with one that is less shameful: anger. Activist Tony

Porter describes how boys learn to process emotions: “We can talk about being pissed off, we can talk about being angry, we can’t talk about being sad” (*The Mask You Live In*). If men are to exhibit any feeling, it should be anger; otherwise, they need to get over whatever upset them, and they need to do so silently.

Finally, sexual prowess is a determinant of manliness. An article published by the Berkeley Journal of Sociology argues that “explicit talk of sexual exploits” and “erotic bonding among men” are part of “broader trends in popular culture and marketing” in the United States (Messner 80). The idea that masculinity partially centers around having sex is widespread; “players” and “womanizers” are lauded not just because they have sex with a lot of women, but because each sexual encounter is seen as a conquest. With each “conquest,” men further assert their dominance and their masculinity.

Each pillar of masculinity has more in common with the others than just upholding the toxic model of the American male. Individually, each characteristic exhibits a more covert quality of dominance—to physically intimidate another, to financially dwarf a colleague or loved one, to suppress and control emotion, to bed women with ease and impudence. This characteristic of dominance is why masculinity is so integral to the world of sports. In this industry, people make money by literally dominating their competitors. It is the MVP who makes the most money; it is the championship team that everyone wants to join. Professional athletes are a type of everyday superhero, in terms of masculinity. They are muscular, they make millions of dollars, they date supermodels and actresses, and their passion is well-received by audiences when they get angry at a bad call. Men see sports as an embodiment of masculinity, a display of Social Darwinism that determines who are real men and who are not. In their eyes, there is no need for women to take part in this competition; ergo, they work to exclude women who try to

break into the industry. This exclusion occurs in three significant ways: the dismissive attitude toward female athletes; the overwhelming forgiveness of violent male athletes; and harassment of female professionals in broadcasting and business.

Look at the comments under any Instagram post from ESPN or Bleacher Report that highlights an accomplishment by a female athlete, and revel in the hordes of angry men who feel the need to share their contempt for women's sports. Remarks range from relative indifference to casual, overplayed sexism, but they all send the same message: elite athleticism only matters if men are the ones performing. This treatment does not only come from semi-anonymous Internet commenters. The organizations for which these women play have reinforced these beliefs by offering substandard compensation to their athletes.

The U.S. women's national soccer team is currently suing the U.S. Soccer Federation for gender-based wage discrimination (Murray). Despite the women's great success on the international soccer stage, they do not receive comparable pay to their male counterparts. The lawsuit exposes the inequitable pay, arguing "that if the men's and women's teams won each of the 20 non-tournament games they are contractually required to play, women's team players would each earn a maximum of \$99,000...and men's team players would earn \$263,320." The compensation gap is not closed with tournament pay, because "from 2013 to 2016, women players earned \$15,000 for making the national team, and the men earned \$55,000 in 2014 and \$68,750 in 2018." This is particularly egregious, considering the women have won the World Cup four times, while "the men's best finish came in 1930, when the team placed third" (Kaplan). A rebuttal from U.S. Soccer "argued that women have inherently less 'ability' than men" and that "this wasn't a 'sexist trope' but simply 'indisputable science'" (Murray). Although U.S. Soccer president Carlos Cordeiro has resigned since the controversial comment was made,

the remarks expose the true opinions of the organization: these athletes should not be paid fairly because they are women. Because they cannot be forced out of their own league, men who embody the values of toxic masculinity will settle for the propagation of sexist beliefs regarding the inferior physicality of women. In essence, women are allowed to play sports, but these competitions are innately lesser—they aren't "real" sports.

While battles for equal compensation rage on, toxic masculinity continues to support violent athletes simply because of their athletic skill. Consider the career of Jameis Winston, winner of the Heisman Trophy and 2013 College Football National Champion. Sports commentators everywhere ignore his alleged sexual assault of former FSU student Erica Kinsman. The details of the assault are far from unique: Winston gave Kinsman a shot at a bar, and then Kinsman "did not remember much aside from being in a ground-floor apartment, where [Winston]...took off her clothes and engaged in intercourse with her, despite her objections" (McLaughlin). Despite fears that such allegations would ruin his life, Winston has gone on to play as a quarterback in the NFL. When people talk about Winston, they talk about his thirty touchdown, thirty interception season and his prospects as a free agent. The only criticisms against him that are entertained are those that regard his abysmal interception statistics.

Men who commit heinous acts of violence against women can find haven if they are elite athletes. Michael Vick received greater backlash for dogfighting than Jameis Winston received for rape. What does that portray to women who are interested in the professional sports industry? By offering not only forgiveness, but denial of such abhorrent wrongdoing on the part of male athletes, fans and commentators alike support the notion that the world of professional sports is for men, dissuading women from trying to carve out a niche of their own in the industry.

With determination and tenacity, women have worked their way into the male-dominated sports industry, earning positions as journalists, announcers, analysts, and agents. Still, they face toxic work environments in their respective fields. This is not unique to the sports industry. According to a survey of three thousand workers conducted by RAND Corporation and Harvard Medical School, “one in five reported facing verbal abuse, threats, humiliation, or unwanted sexual advances—*on a monthly basis*” (Lyons 26). This type of work atmosphere is publicly disavowed but privately encouraged by Silicon Valley-type corporations. One woman shared disturbing stories from her time at a company called Frog. She would “be pulled into a windowless conference room to have [her] boss share anonymous team member feedback, where people would discuss [her] looks...and [her] IQ.” Instead of promoting a more amicable relationship between workers, her boss would tell her to “improve [her] performance so people ‘wouldn’t have to write stuff like that’” (Lyons 20). These management techniques can best be described as bullying. By bullying workers into submission, managers exercise the masculine need to dominate over others. They belittle their faculty, undermining workers’ self-esteem in a twisted effort to motivate them. They hide behind the tagline, “We’re a team, not a family” (Lyons 108) to justify the toxicity.

What’s more disturbing than the intimidation and belittlement of workers are the sincere efforts by some people to promote exclusionary business practices. In 1995, billionaires Peter Thiel and David Sacks wrote a book called *The Diversity Myth*. The premise of the book “decried the rise of ‘political correctness’ and multiculturalism” on college campuses. They defend Keith Rabois, who screamed homophobic slurs while at Stanford University, posit that “women who claim to have been raped might actually have been experiencing ‘belated regret,’” and argue against the existence of institutionalized racism (Lyons 38-39). Successful people who

argue against the importance of diversity gives fodder to people who wish to maintain the typical demographics of industry; in relation to the world of professional sports, this means working to exclude women from participating.

This attempted exclusion comes in many different forms from many different people. In a Carolina Panthers press conference, female reporter Jourdan Rodrigue asked quarterback Cam Newton a question about one of his receiver's routes. Before answering, Newton smiled and said, "It's funny to hear a female talk about routes" (Lyles). Although Rodrigue is a qualified reporter, Newton feels she has no place speaking about the intricacies of the game. In his mind, football is a man's game, to be enjoyed and understood by men. There is no need for a woman to partake in such discussions. To hear such a sexist remark from a professional athlete is especially disappointing—a man who many people admire holds the belief that women cannot contribute substantively to the sport. Although he did receive backlash for his remarks, he exposed a truth that no apology can hide: men still feel that the sports industry is their domain.

The campaign against female journalists does not end with the sexist behavior of the athletes they interview. In a video posted by Just Not Sports, men read "mean" tweets directed to sports writers Sarah Spain and Julie DiCaro. The tamest tweets call the writers "nagging" and "mediocre." Yet, the tweets escalate to a disgusting display of sadism as faceless commenters send heinous messages like, "I hope your boyfriend beats you," and, "I hope you get raped again" (qtd. in Rense). When belittlement fails, misogynistic critics instead harass women who are simply doing their jobs. The threats of violence are both extreme and commonplace. They are attempts to force women out of the industry, out of their livelihoods.

Even other women doubt the abilities of female workers in the sports industry. NFL agent Kelli Masters recalls a time that she was about to sign a client when his mother stopped him. Her

reasoning? She didn't think Masters was capable "because [she's] a woman" (Taylor). The idea that sports are a man's domain is so engrained in American culture that it affects women's perception of their abilities as a gender. Although women have earned positions as agents and journalists, people still doubt the competence of women to do their jobs, thereby sustaining the ideology of toxic masculinity in the sports industry.

Sexism may run deeply in the world of sports, but there is hope to eradicate the misogyny that reigns. Jessica Berman, Deputy Commissioner and Executive Vice President of Business Affairs of the National Lacrosse League and the Sports Lawyers Association September "Member in the Spotlight" argues that people (particularly women) who want to work in this competitive industry should focus on "the areas that other people aren't so focused on, so that you can have a little more runway to make your mark and to build out your credibility and your work product in a place where you're not stepping on other people's toes" ("Highest Ranking..."). While this may have suited her career goals, I believe that greater change will come from people who aren't concerned with "stepping on other people's toes." Women must remain unflinching in the face of sexism in the sports industry. Shying away from the discomfort of misogyny will not make it go away. They must continue performing at the highest level, entering the most competitive sectors, and excelling in their careers to demonstrate that they deserve power and responsibility within the industry.

More broadly, we must change "the sexist social norms in male culture, from the elementary school playground to the common room in retirement communities—and every locker room, pool hall, and boardroom in between" (Katz 8). By dismantling our notions of masculinity and demonstrating that domination, control, bullying, and harassment do not belong



in the professional world, we can make the sports industry a more accessible and equitable place for all.

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