

Out of hand:
Media coverage of domestic violence
in the NFL, an analysis of the Ray Rice and
Greg Hardy cases

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"I like to hurt women when I make love to them.... I like to hear them scream with pain, to see them bleed.... It gives me pleasure."

Mike Tyson, Hall of Fame boxer

"I think if rape is inevitable, relax and enjoy it."

Bob Knight, Hall of Fame basketball coach

"I'm going to go home and beat my wife."

Joe Paterno, Hall of Fame football coach, after a loss

"This is a game that, if you lose, you go home and beat your wife and kids."

Charles Barkley, Hall of Fame basketball player

INTRODUCTION

On July 18, 1995, seven-year-old Jeffrey Moon dialed 911 to report that his parents were engaged in a violent altercation. His mother, Felicia Moon, told police when they arrived that her husband had slapped her, choked her, and engaged her in a high-speed car chase.¹ Three days later, during a joint press conference in the couple's home, his father, Warren Moon, then the starting quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings and the NFL's Man of the Year in 1989, admitted he had made a "terrible mistake".² Later that day, Warren Moon was charged with one count of misdemeanor assault. Over the next several months, Felicia pleaded for him not to be prosecuted. Warren claimed that this was not a case of domestic violence but rather a "domestic dispute" that had gotten out of hand.³

In many ways, this played out like a typical case of domestic violence in America, where approximately 1.3 million women and 835,000 men are physically assaulted by an intimate partner each year, according to the Department of Justice.⁴ What made this

¹ "Out of Bounds," *The Harvard Law Review Association*, 1996, 1048.

² Lester Munson and William Nack, "Sports' Dirty Secret," *Sports Illustrated*, July 31, 1995.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Shannon Catalano, "Intimate Partner Violence: Attributes of Victimization, 1993–2011," *U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics*, November 2013.

different, however, was Warren Moon's hero status in Houston, where he played quarterback for the Oilers for ten seasons and was known for his charity work. As William Nack and Lester Munson wrote in *Sports Illustrated* the week following the arrest:

There is no telling the outcome. Warren is a folk hero in Houston, a doer of good works – and this, after all, is a case of domestic violence. A neck-wringing minimized as a "domestic dispute." An assault masquerading as an argument. A crime perceived and treated like no other in America, especially, it seems, when it is committed by an athlete.⁵

On February 23, 1996, Warren Moon was acquitted. It took the jury less than half an hour to reach a decision.⁶

It's difficult to provide accurate statistics on domestic violence, as it is estimated that only one in ten incidents is reported.⁷ Domestic violence is the single major cause of injury to women⁸ and of all the women murdered in 2010, approximately 40 percent were killed by a spouse or someone they were dating⁹, compared to 2 to 3 percent for men.¹⁰ Domestic violence injuries are more common for women than injuries from auto accidents, muggings, and rapes combined.¹¹ Notoriously difficult to prosecute in court, many victims in domestic violence cases choose not to testify for various reasons, including fear of retribution from the abuser.¹² Additionally, because attackers have an intimate relationship

⁵ Lester Munson and William Nack, "Sports' Dirty Secret," *Sports Illustrated*, July 31, 1995.

⁶ Kate Murphy, "Jury Rapidly Acquits Moon of Spousal Abuse Charges," *The New York Times*, February 23, 1996.

⁷ Brant Webb, "Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Curbing the Trend of Domestic Violence in the National Football League and Major League Baseball," *American University Journal of Gender Social Policy and Law* 20, no. 3 (2012): 742.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Shannon Catalano, "Intimate Partner Violence: Attributes of Victimization, 1993–2011," *U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics*, November 2013.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Brant Webb, "Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Curbing the Trend of Domestic Violence in the National Football League and Major League Baseball," *American University Journal of Gender Social Policy and Law* 20, no. 3 (2012): 742.

¹² Travis Waldron, "Why Victims Of Domestic Violence Don't Testify, Particularly Against NFL Players," *Think Progress*, February 11, 2015.

with their victims, they have an advantage other criminals don't in that they are able to appeal for sympathy from the public, the criminal justice system, and the jury.¹³ This is especially true for professional athletes. In 1995, domestic violence cases involving professional athletes resulted in a 35 percent conviction rate, compared to 77 percent for the general population.¹⁴

The National Football League in particular has had a long history of domestic violence. In the 1990s, the high-profile cases of Moon and O.J. Simpson led then-Commissioner Paul Tagliabue to adopt the Personal Conduct Policy in 1997, the first of its kind in professional sports. The policy stated:

“the Commissioner will have the right . . . to fine . . . to suspend . . . and/or to terminate this contract” if the player is “guilty of any . . . form of conduct reasonably judged by the League Commissioner to be detrimental to the League or professional football.”¹⁵

Recently, two high-profile players have been suspended for domestic violence by current Commissioner Roger Goodell under an updated version of this policy – running back Ray Rice, formerly of the Baltimore Ravens, and defensive end Greg Hardy, who played with the Dallas Cowboys during the 2015 season. This project will look at the cases of these two players in order to analyze the way sports media cover domestic violence committed by professional football players. By looking at the ways in which the media covers domestic violence in the NFL, I hope to bring forward a discussion of how media influences the way Americans view domestic violence throughout our society.

¹³ Diana Moskovitz, “The Only Thing Unusual About Ray And Janay Rice Is That Anyone Noticed,” *Deadspin*, September 11, 2014.

¹⁴ Bethany P. Withers, “The Integrity of the Game: Professional Athletes and Domestic Violence,” *Journal of Sports and Entertainment Law*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010): 149.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media coverage of domestic violence in the United States

Prior to the feminist movement of the 1970s, domestic violence was viewed as a private matter, if it even registered on a person's radar at all. It wasn't until domestic violence shelters began opening in pockets of the United States that social awareness of the issue increased, aided by the news media's "discovery" of domestic violence in 1973.¹⁶ In her research, Nancy Berns found that many of her respondents cited "The Burning Bed," a 1984 made-for-TV movie starring Farah Fawcett as an abused wife who burns her husband to death while he's sleeping, as their first exposure to the issue.¹⁷ Coverage of domestic violence remained sporadic into the mid-1990s, when the 1993 case of Lorena Bobbitt severing her abusive husband's penis and O.J. Simpson's 1994 murder trial brought the issue to the national spotlight.

As both Berns and Suzanne Marie Enck-Wanzer have found, coverage of domestic violence over the past two decades has followed similar patterns. First, the news media sensationalize domestic violence stories by focusing on gruesome murders or high-profile individuals.¹⁸ This creates the idea that domestic violence is an extreme event and that men who commit acts of violence are sick, ignoring the social roots of the violence.¹⁹ Second, media, particularly women's magazines, focuses on what the victim should do to

¹⁶ Suzanne Marie Enck-Wanzer, "All's Fair in Love and Sport: Black Masculinity and Domestic Violence in the News," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2009): 4.

¹⁷ Nancy Berns, *Framing the Victim: Domestic Violence Media and Social Problems* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 2004), 35-36.

¹⁸ Suzanne Marie Enck-Wanzer, "All's Fair in Love and Sport: Black Masculinity and Domestic Violence in the News," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2009): 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

escape the situation or why a victim of intimate partner homicide didn't leave.²⁰ This focuses on domestic violence as an individual issue, not a societal one, and furthermore, one that women are responsible for ending. Enck-Wanzer notes, "news accounts typically minimize any focus on hegemonic masculine entitlement and thus, deny a demand of wider cultural urgency."²¹ By covering the issue in this manner, the news media create an impression that eliminating domestic violence is an individual's responsibility, not one that belongs to a society that teaches men they must control their women. An example from the Warren Moon case illustrates this phenomenon, as his lawyer and agent, Leigh Steinberg, said during his arrest, "I don't understand what the governmental interest is. He has faced his own conduct. He has admitted it privately and publicly.... What societal value is protected by arresting Warren Moon?"²²

As Enck-Wanzer notes, this frame changes when the accused is a celebrity. To come to this conclusion, she surveyed every article in the *Reader's Guide to Periodic Literature* on domestic violence from 1990 to 2005. She found that with few exceptions, every article that focused on the abusive men instead of the victim concentrated on athletes, movie stars, musicians, or military personnel.²³ Focusing on abusive sports figures, she finds a common theme throughout the articles: "the black athlete out of control,"²⁴ and argues that when aggressive play is combined with natural blackness and stardom, the media portrays the natural result as violence against women.

²⁰ Nancy Berns, *Framing the Victim: Domestic Violence Media and Social Problems* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 2004), 55-81.

²¹ Suzanne Marie Enck-Wanzer, "All's Fair in Love and Sport: Black Masculinity and Domestic Violence in the News," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2009): 4.

²² Lester Munson and William Nack, "Sports' Dirty Secret," *Sports Illustrated*, July 31, 1995.

²³ Suzanne Marie Enck-Wanzer, "All's Fair in Love and Sport: Black Masculinity and Domestic Violence in the News," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2009): 5.

²⁴ Ibid.

The effect of sports culture on violence against women

The first major look at violence against women among athletes was in the Harvard Law Review's article "Out of Bounds" in 1996.²⁵ The authors presented two possible explanations for the prevalence of this violence in sports:

First, players trained to use violence and intimidation on the field may have difficulty preventing these lessons from carrying over into their personal relationships. Second, sports may cultivate a "macho sub-culture" that equates masculinity with violence, "denigrat[es] anything considered feminine," and thereby "set[s] the stage for violence against women."²⁶

In our most popular spectator sports, winning depends on the use of violence.²⁷ An athlete spends his life focusing on obtaining and maintaining control over his opponent, often using violence to get it. When so much of his life is centered on control, it's easy to see how it can spill over from the field into the home. The remainder of this section will focus on the second explanation, how a hyper-masculine sports culture contributes to violence against women.

Organized sports arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to "masculinize" young males in a "feminized" culture.²⁸ As an observation from his years growing up playing youth and college sports, Don Sabo writes in *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports*:

To be manly in sports, traditionally, means to be competitive, successful, dominating, aggressive, stoical, goal-directed, and physically strong. Many athletes accept this definition of masculinity and apply it in their relationships with women. Dating becomes a sport in itself, and "scoring," or having sex with little or no emotional involvement, is a mark of masculine achievement. Sexual relationships are games in which women are seen as

²⁵ "Out of Bounds," *The Harvard Law Review Association*, 1996, 1048-1065.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1050.

²⁷ Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, "When Bodies Are Weapons," in *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports* (California: The Crossing Press, 1994): 89.

²⁸ Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, "Women in the Men's Locker Room?," in *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports* (California: The Crossing Press, 1994): 46.

opponents, and his scoring means her defeat. Too often, women are pawns in men's quests for status within the male pecking order. For many of us jocks, sexual relationships are about man as a hunter and woman as prey.²⁹

In this description, Sabo illustrates the “macho sub-culture” mentioned above. Throughout their book, Sabo and his co-author, Michael Messner, provide countless examples of sexism and homophobia in the locker room. Messner describes the time in high school when a few older kids on the team ordered him and his friend, both presumed to be virgins, a prostitute.³⁰ He describes another instance, while working at the University of California, Berkeley, when he was watching a women’s softball game between Division I Cal and another top-ranked team. After a perfectly executed relay to throw the runner out at home, a fellow fan said to him, “you know, it amazes me to see a woman throw like that. I always thought there was something about the female arm that made it impossible for a woman to throw like a man.”³¹ This mindset makes its way up to the professional ranks as well. In “Sports’ Dirty Secret,” Nack and Munson describe the day in 1978 when the New York Yankees first allowed a female reporter into the locker room.³² When the women entered the room, they were greeted by a two-foot long cake in the shape of a penis, with chocolate shavings mimicking pubic hairs covering the part of the cake shaped as testicles.

Sabo sees the communication gap and hyper-masculine mindset between the sexes as a result of girls’ historical exclusion from sports.³³ In this environment, he argues, sexual myths flourish as boys learn about girls and female sexuality from other boys and this

²⁹ Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, “The Myth of the Sexual Athlete,” in *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports* (California: The Crossing Press, 1994): 38.

³⁰ Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, “Indignities: A Short Story,” in *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports* (California: The Crossing Press, 1994): 22-23.

³¹ Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, “Ah, Ya Throw Like a Girl!,” in *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports* (California: The Crossing Press, 1994): 29.

³² Lester Munson and William Nack, “Sports’ Dirty Secret,” *Sports Illustrated*, July 31, 1995.

³³ Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, “The Myth of the Sexual Athlete,” in *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports* (California: The Crossing Press, 1994): 38.

information is often inaccurate and anti-woman. Nack and Munson point out that “machospeak” and the demeaning of women are the means by which men express their maleness in the locker room.³⁴ Especially in contact sports, such as football, things seen as feminine are things to be avoided. Todd Crossett, a former swimmer at Texas and a former athletic director at Dartmouth, says:

"Part of the male athlete's sub-world is not to be a woman, Women are degraded. You don't want to be skirt-of-the-week. You don't want to be a wimp, a sissy. To be a man is not to be a woman. Women are not to be respected. Women are despised."³⁵

Despite all of the anecdotal evidence of sexism in male sports culture, there is no conclusive evidence as to whether athletes are more likely to commit violent acts against women than the rest of society. One study of cases of sexual assault at ten NCAA Division I schools between 1991 and 1993 by researchers at Northeastern University and the University of Massachusetts found that while athletes comprised 3.3 percent of the male student body, they were involved in nineteen percent of reported sexual assaults.³⁶ However, the seemingly high rates of domestic violence among professional football players maybe a result of the disproportionately high media attention they receive. In one analysis, *FiveThirtyEight* found that the arrest rate for domestic violence in the National Football League was 55.4 percent of the general 25-to-29-year-old male population.³⁷ While lower than the national rate, domestic violence was the highest proportionally among all crimes studied (gun-related, non-violent came in at 45.2 percent), and four times the league's overall arrest rate (13 percent), explaining why it seems football players

³⁴ Lester Munson and William Nack, “Sports’ Dirty Secret,” *Sports Illustrated*, July 31, 1995.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Bethany P. Withers, “The Integrity of the Game: Professional Athletes and Domestic Violence,” *Journal of Sports and Entertainment Law*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010): 148.

³⁷ Benjamin Morris, “The Rate of Domestic Violence Arrests Among NFL Players,” *FiveThirtyEight*, July 31, 2014.

commit acts of domestic violence at a higher rate. Overall, they found domestic violence accounts for 48 percent of arrests for violent crimes among NFL players, compared to 21 percent nationally. Regardless of whether athletes commit acts of gendered violence at a rate higher than that of the general population, the media's focus on sports and the effect sport has on our society make this a critical aspect to evaluate when studying the media's portrayal of domestic violence.

A brief history of domestic violence in the National Football League

As Bethany P. Winters points out, sports leagues have a long history of punishing players for drug use and gambling, even when these activities don't impact the game, but have largely ignored domestic violence.³⁸ One study indicated that out of 141 athletes reported to the police for violence against women from 1989 to 1994, only one was disciplined by the league.³⁹ That began to change as a direct result of the O.J. Simpson case in 1994, when then-NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue sent domestic violence counselors to all twenty-eight team training camps within weeks of the murders. Three years later, Tagliabue adopted the Violent Crime Policy, a version of which is now the Personal Conduct Policy. It remained the only policy of its kind among major U.S. sports until Major League Baseball instituted its own in 2015.

Under the Personal Conduct Policy, punishment was previously left entirely up to the commissioner. In 2007, new commissioner Roger Goodell strengthened the policy by

³⁸ Bethany P. Withers, "The Integrity of the Game: Professional Athletes and Domestic Violence," *Journal of Sports and Entertainment Law*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010): 146.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

making it clear violators would be subject to longer suspensions and harsher fines.⁴⁰

Additionally, the updated policy allowed for punishment without a conviction in court, stating that NFL players are held to a higher standard and must conduct themselves in a way that “promotes the values on which the League is based.”⁴¹ In 2014, Goodell again strengthened the policy, raising the minimum suspension for a first offense to six games and instituting a lifetime ban for repeat offenders, as a direct result of the backlash he received for suspending Rice for only two games after video emerged of the running back knocking out his fiancée in an elevator.

An investigation by ESPN’s *Outside the Lines*, however, found that the NFL largely did not stick to its own policy from 2000 to 2014, stating:

out of 48 players considered guilty of domestic violence under the league policy between 2000 through 2014, the league suspended players for one game or not at all in 88 percent of the cases. Twenty-seven players – or 56 percent – received no suspension, and 15 others were forced to sit out one game.⁴²

Further, four victims interviewed by *Outside the Lines* said that the league never contacted them before ruling on the abuser’s punishment.⁴³ As Brant Webb writes, the most likely reason for this hesitation to punish stems from the threat of lost revenue. If fewer star players are playing due to suspension, it means potentially fewer exciting games and less fan interest.⁴⁴ As the most popular sport in North America, the NFL has a lot of money at stake. Over the past two decades, the league has struggled to find the balance between

⁴⁰ Ibid., 169.

⁴¹ Ibid., 170.

⁴² Mark Fainaru-Wada and Steve Fainaru, “OTL: NFL didn’t enforce own policies,” *ESPN*, November 12, 2014.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Brant Webb, “Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Curbing the Trend of Domestic Violence in the National Football League and Major League Baseball,” *American University Journal of Gender Social Policy and Law* 20, no. 3 (2012): 758.

keeping talented players on the field and not losing sponsorship money for letting criminals go unpunished.

The influence of sport on our society

There is no denying the great impact sport has on our society. Every major daily newspaper has a sports section. Sports occupy hours of commercial radio and television airtime each week. Fans fill arenas and stadiums around the world to root maniacally for their teams. Parents and children devote hours after school and on weekends to youth sports. NCAA Division I schools spend \$11,769 per academic student, but \$36,665 per student athlete.⁴⁵ Fantasy sports is a \$26 billion industry.⁴⁶ A 30-second advertisement during Super Bowl 50 this past February cost \$4.5 million as an estimated 111.9 million Americans watched the game.⁴⁷ Forbes estimates that the sports industry in North America will reach \$73.5 billion by 2019.⁴⁸ That's larger than the gross domestic product of 119 countries.⁴⁹

Numbers on the percentage of the American population that considers themselves sports fans vary, but no matter which survey you look at, the percentage is large. According to a 2014 survey, 70 percent of Americans (168 million) claim to follow sports⁵⁰, including 49 percent who follow football. These fans are 55% male and 45% female and are split almost evenly when it comes to age and income. The same survey found that sports fans

⁴⁵ Barry Petchesky, "SEC Schools Spend \$163,931 Per Athlete, And Other Ways The NCAA Is A Bonfire For Your Money," *Deadspin*, January 16, 2013.

⁴⁶ Kristin Wong, "The Fantasy Sports Industry, by the Numbers," *NBC News*, October 6, 2015.

⁴⁷ Richard Deitsch, "How the Super Bowl 50 ratings stack up," *Sports Illustrated*, February 8, 2016.

⁴⁸ Darren Heitner, "Sports Industry To Reach \$73.5 Billion By 2019," *Forbes*, October 19, 2015.

⁴⁹ "World GDP Ranking, 2015," last modified November 10, 2015, <http://knoema.com/nwnfkne/world-gdp-ranking-2015-data-and-charts>.

⁵⁰ "The Global Sports Media Consumption Report 2014," *SportBusiness* Group, May 2014.

spend an average of 7.7 hours per week consuming sports content. With this level of saturation into American society, sports have an impact beyond the game. For many fans who spend more time consuming sports media than any other kind of news, a story on domestic violence committed by an athlete may be their only exposure to the issue. After video footage of Rice knocking his then-fiancée, Janay Rice unconscious was released, calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline surged 84 percent.⁵¹ As Tim Delaney writes, in *The Sociology of Sport*, “to ignore sport is to ignore a significant aspect of any society and its culture.”⁵² It is for this reason that we must look at how the sports media cover gendered violence among athletes to analyze the effect the media has on our culture’s perceptions of domestic violence.

JUSTIFICATION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As presented in the literature review, sports have an enormous impact on our society and the media plays a key role in determining how we view domestic violence as a society. Additionally, sport has a long history of a hyper-masculine culture that promotes anti-woman views. The NFL, the most popular sports league in America, in particular has dealt with players committing acts of domestic violence for decades. For these reasons, an analysis of how the sports media portrays domestic violence is imperative to a larger understanding of the way the media portrays gendered violence. For the purposes of this project, I will focus on two NFL players who have recently been involved in domestic violence cases, Ray Rice and Greg Hardy.

⁵¹ Laura Bassett, “Ray Rice Video Causes Huge Spike In Calls To Domestic Violence Hotline,” *The Huffington Post*, September 11, 2014.

⁵² Tim Delaney, “The Sociology of Sport,” *The Sociology of Sports: An Introduction*, (US: McFarland, 2009): 3.

Research questions

RQ1: Does the sports media cover domestic violence among athletes through an individual or societal frame? If individual, is the focus on the athlete or the victim?

RQ2: Does a player's ability on the field affect how he is portrayed by the media in a case of domestic violence?

RQ3: Is there a difference in coverage of domestic violence cases in the NFL between traditional sports media outlets and alternative ones?

Overall, I hope to provide viewers with an overall snapshot of how sports media covered the domestic violence cases of Ray Rice and Greg Hardy. I hope they come away with an understanding of how the media frames the way we think about domestic violence, inside and outside the context of sports.

METHODOLOGY

This project will be a news-style multimedia website displaying timelines of both the Ray Rice and Greg Hardy cases. The timelines will include links to articles from ESPN, Sports Illustrated and Deadspin. These three outlets were chosen because they all exclusively cover sports, but have different interests. Sports Illustrated is a sports news organization; ESPN is a sports news organization, but with an invested (and conflict-of-) interest in broadcasting sports; and Deadspin is a newer, alternative sports site. While this project will not be able to include every piece published on these topics, a wide range of examples will be selected and analyzed. For each event on the timelines, I will look at several articles and analyze how the media framed the event. This will be a qualitative study of the coverage these cases received from these three media outlets.

Ray Rice and Greg Hardy were selected because their cases both occurred within the last two years and received a disproportionate amount of media attention. Most people, even non-sports fans, are aware of both of these cases. They also serve as a contrast for RQ2, as Rice was on the downswing of his career at the time of the violence, and was subsequently shunned from the league, while Hardy was still a highly effective player and was signed by a new team, the Cowboys, following his appeal.

Additionally, an adapted version of the introduction and literature review will serve as an introduction and overview for the project when viewers enter the site. Once completed, the site will provide viewers with background information on domestic violence in the NFL, and an interactive overview of how the media covered the Rice and Hardy cases.

Limitations

This project has several limitations. The first is that I am only looking at two cases of domestic violence, although there have been dozens of players accused of such violence in the NFL alone. This project focuses specifically on the NFL, and further research could be done on the other three major North American professional sports leagues, as well as the NCAA. Additionally, I am only looking at three self-selected news outlets and will not be able to analyze every piece produced on these topics. In several studies that I read, the research was more comprehensive, but focused on a time before the Internet when media coverage was more limited. A comprehensive study of sports media coverage of Ray Rice and Greg Hardy is beyond the magnitude of this project.