

The Kobe Bryant Case: Athletes, Violence, Stereotypes and the Games We Play

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Special for the Sports Business Journal

Like so many who follow sports, I have been glued to the news about Kobe Bryant, now charged with sexual assault. Let me say up front that I am not a Lakers fan. I was not even a fan of Kobe until this year when I read of the turmoil he went through with his parents when he fell in love with and married his wife Vanessa. That made me pay more attention to the seemingly softer, loving side of the sports icon.

That made the charge against him even more striking. I have spent nearly 30 years studying sport and social issues. Each time an athlete is arrested I take note and fear the inevitable consequences. Some in the media and many fans will claim that athletes, especially basketball and football players, are more violent than ordinary men. Stories about basketball and football players battering or sexually assaulting a woman are so common in the press, averaging nearly 100 cases a year for the last five years, that people barely take notice now. Averaging two reports a week for five year makes the general public simply note, "another example of a violent sport."

I think for many it reinforces a stereotype held by too many whites that African-Americans are more violent against women. Decades of studies on racial attitudes show that a large percentage of whites believe this to be true in spite of all the national data disproving it as is the case with most stereotypes. The act is one that crosses all racial, economic, geographic and educational boundaries. With 3 percent of American men estimated to be batterers, this is clearly not about African-American men playing pro sports. It is about men in our society who on a daily basis batter 8,200 women and rape more than 2,300. A day! That works out to 3 million cases of battering and one million rapes per year. Even if you think cases of athletes are underreported, do the math. If they are underreported by a ratio of 10 to 1, (an extremely high estimate), then we have 1,000 athletes a year. That is a barely notable fraction of the millions of annual sexual assaults. Some athletes, indeed, do have a problem but this is not a problem of and about athletes.

That makes the story about Kobe Bryant the exception. We accepted him. He was above the bad things happening in sport and in society. I don't have to repeat all the accolades bestowed on him since high school. He was "different." Many whites who hold stereotypes of African-Americans often cite having a black friend. Somewhere in the conversation when they describe that friend, they will offer that he or she is "different." Different from what? The implication is clear. For many of my African-American friends and associates, to be referred to as "different" is extremely offensive.

Too much of the talk is now about what will happen to Kobe's endorsements, to the Lakers chemistry in the year they were set to blow away the competition, and what will happen to the NBA. If this can happen to Kobe, then what could befall less stable stars? It is being said that the future of basketball looks bleak. The sensitive writers or commentators also add concern about the alleged victim and about Kobe's family.

Yes, I am worried about all those things but I am more worried that this is one more spike in the arsenal of racists. I do not pretend to know if Kobe is innocent or guilty of the charge. I think I hope he is innocent but that is not relevant. Certainly I also feel for the young lady and her family if she was assaulted. I was quoted extensively in an LA Times story on the case and said some of the things I have written here.

Before I read the story, I got the following unsigned email:

So your bio refers to you as the "racial conscience of sport". OK, fine. Spend a couple moments and play my "word game" described below. Tell me how YOU do (I'm doing the grading). Then when you're done, let's talk about the fact -not a supposition, but a FACT -that while athletes in general are often guilty of violence and mistreatment of women at a rate higher than the general population, there is

within the athlete community a subset that has a rate of violence in general and violence towards women that can legitimately be described as at crisis levels.

What to do about it? I don't know. But the issues first must be tackled directly and honestly, without gloss or feel-good niceties, before any real progress can be made. And until the sports world in this country candidly admits that black male athletes have a problem and something must be done about it, all of the report cards, centers and consortiums are just so much mental masturbation.

Good luck on the word game! Subject: Today's Word Game!!

Instructions:

1. Skim the attached article from LA Times 7.19.03, entitled : "Athletes Part of a Violent Trend".
 2. Note all the athletes mentioned in the course of the article. (Hint for successful completion of game: see if you notice any SIMILARITIES among the athletes mentioned)
 3. Suggest a NEW word that could easily replace the word "ATHLETES" in the title of the article, yet still accurately convey the article's themes of violence in general and violence against women.
- Good Luck!

The writer obviously was looking for the answers to be African-American. That is the danger in the bigger picture of the Kobe Bryant case. Too many people absolutely believe that it is a "fact - not a supposition, but a FACT -that while athletes in general are often guilty of violence and mistreatment of women at a rate higher than the general population, there is within the athlete community a subset that has a rate of violence in general and violence towards women that can legitimately be described as at crisis levels."

His - and I am convinced many others' subset, is African-American males. His "evidence," in spite of the overwhelming data presented against his case in the LA Times article and in this column, is that "all the athletes mentioned" in the article (three plus Kobe) were African-American. That plus his life experiences of learned stereotypes, make him conclude that "black male athletes have a problem and something must be done about it." As a student of racial issues for nearly 40 years, I know he is hardly alone among white people.

This case will, by its nature, further open the racial divide in America. In the end, the greatest victims may not be the alleged victim and her family, Kobe Bryant and his family, the Lakers, the NBA and corporate America that uses African-American athletes as pitchmen. The biggest victim may be African-Americans, once again unfairly stereotyped because of the real or perceived terrible misdeeds of a handful of people who look like them.

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