

Memo to the NFL: Real Men Don't Beat up Women

I grew up in the South, where football is practically a religion, and people scream louder for their college teams than they praise God on Sundays. When I was a scrawny kid living in Alabama, I wished I had biceps as big as Joe Namath's, but at some point I realized heaven hadn't given me a football player's body.

I'm good with that, because I've learned that real manhood has nothing to do with muscles or swagger or the ability to throw a 40-yard touchdown pass. I still admire athletes—and I intend to cheer for the Florida Gators this season (even though they've already lost to Alabama). But at the same time I'm throwing out my yellow penalty flag because something has gone horribly wrong in America's favorite sport.

Football has become increasingly associated with the abuse of women, and that's not OK.

In college football we have the sad case of Florida State quarterback Jameis Winston, who won the Heisman Trophy in 2013. A woman in Tallahassee says Winston raped her, and the allegations have cast a dark cloud over a championship team. Similar charges have been filed against players at UCLA, the University of Kansas, Tulane, the University of Miami, and many other schools. At the University of Oklahoma, star linebacker Frank Shannon was suspended after a female student claimed he assaulted her.

And then there's pro football. We all know that Ray Rice, the celebrated running back for the Baltimore Ravens, has been suspended indefinitely from the NFL after he beat up his fiancée (now his wife) until she was unconscious and then dragged her out of an elevator in February. The sad fact is

that Rice would not have been so seriously penalized if a video of the assault had not gone viral. Too often, a woman's cuts, bruises and broken bones are not enough proof that she was abused.

I don't have room here to list the NFL's Hall of Shame, but here are just a few examples of pro football players who obviously believed it was acceptable to abuse women:

- Darren Sharper of the New Orleans Saints recently was charged with drugging and raping two women in California, and he is suspected of raping seven other women in four states.
- Ray McDonald of the San Francisco 49ers was arrested on domestic-violence charges in August. The owner of the team said the 49ers won't punish McDonald until a verdict is reached in the investigation.
- Greg Hardy of the Carolina Panthers was arrested in May after he allegedly assaulted his girlfriend and threatened to kill her if she talked about the crime. He was sentenced to probation but he appealed the verdict, and the case will not be heard until November. He played in the Panthers' opening game but has since taken a leave of absence.
- Minnesota Vikings cornerback A.J. Jefferson was arrested last year for domestic assault by strangulation. He spent three days in jail, and received one year of probation. The NFL initially suspended Jefferson for four games, but later lifted the suspension. He has since signed to play for the Seattle Seahawks.
- Arizona Cardinals linebacker Daryl Washington was arrested last year for assaulting the mother of his child by grabbing her by the throat and pushing her to the ground, breaking her collarbone. In his sentencing, he got one year of supervised probation.

I could go on and on to tell of testosterone gone wild: Athletes who raped 25-year-old women, fondled women in bars,

drugged women's drinks, or sent inappropriate texts and photos.

These guys take the word "professional" out of "professional football." And when college or pro executives keep these boys in the game or offer limp-wristed penalties for something as serious as rape or assault, we are sending the message that it is OK to beat up a woman as long as you run fast on the field, block punts, put points on the board, or win multimillion-dollar advertising deals with Budweiser.

After all, the game must go on, right?

America needs to man up. I'm glad NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell apologized back in August for his handling of the Ray Rice mess and that he made it clear the NFL does not tolerate domestic violence. But it's time for coaches and sports managers all over this country to enact strict no-tolerance rules for abuse. Nobody should cheer for male athletes who beat up women.

Many Americans complained when then-University of Florida quarterback Tim Tebow, an outspoken Christian, got so much attention for kneeling in prayer after his best gridiron plays. But when it comes to role models on the field, Tebow proved that a man can weigh 240 pounds and run a 50-yard touchdown and still have his integrity and character intact when he reaches the goal line.

My prayer in the midst of the NFL crisis is that we will start teaching young men now that no matter how strong they are or how much testosterone is flowing in their veins, a real man will never use his strength to hurt a woman.

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