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Book Review: Public Heroes, Private Felons: Athletes and Crimes Against Women

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*PUBLIC HEROES, PRIVATE FELONS: ATHLETES AND
CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN*

Jeff Benedict

[Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press 1999]

xv/ 266 pages

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“Professional athletics has become such a megagod that it is sometimes unresponsive to the morals of a community.”(pg. 35)

In the public arena, athletes are viewed as role models and heroes, but the public may not know about the private sides of their favorite athletes. In the book *Public Heroes, Private Felons*, the author, Jeff Benedict is one of the first to compose a graphic description of the abusive behaviors of athletes rarely seen by the public. Benedict is the former Director of Research at the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University. Benedict conducted in-depth investigations involving numerous interviews with athletes and victims to uncover the unexplained motivations behind athletes' involvement in rape, gang rape, and assaults.

One major focus of the book is to increase awareness of the violent behavior of athletes by providing detailed examples of actual rape, gang rape and assaults involving notable sports heroes such as O.J Simpson, Mike Tyson, Lewis Billups, members of the University of Nebraska football team, Marcus Webb and Warren Moon. Further, this book explains how the schools, coaches, and court system handled each situation. In most cases, schools and coaches were very protective of their athletes and judges appeared biased toward the athletes. Judges would allow the defense attorneys the opportunity to delay their cases to allow the players to participate in upcoming games. Also, the coaches rarely implemented any punishment to deter player misconduct. For example, Christian Peter, a member of the University of Nebraska football team, was convicted of sexual assault and his coach only suspended him from one pre-season game.

Benedict's book is divided into eleven chapters. In the opening chapters, the book recounts misperceptions of athletes regarding their roles and discusses the public's leniency in its treatment of athletes who are accused of violent behavior. Popular athletes in a community, whether they are in high school, college, or professional athletics, are conveyed as role models. However, this creates a misperception because although athletes are considered heroes and hold high status in the community and among their fan base, they are often prone to violent behavior that

the public is generally unaware of. For example, the world was in amazement when their legendary hero, O.J. Simpson, was accused of two murders, but after considering his adolescent years this episode is not as shocking. Simpson was fatherless, a juvenile delinquent and affiliated with a gang while growing up. The public is rarely informed about an athlete's misconduct because this information is usually kept confidential between the school, the coach, and the player involved. Confidentiality is possible due to both the commonality of the victims' decision to drop the charges and the victims' lack of credibility to support their evidence. Further, when athletes are accused of rape, coaches are typically very protective and may hire elite attorneys to represent their players while paying all legal expenses. In many cases, the issue that makes or breaks the case is whether the relations between athlete and victim are consensual. It is extremely difficult for the victim to prove that the contact was nonconsensual when the victim agrees to accompany the athlete or their team back to the hotel or dorm.

The overwhelming support afforded to athletes instills in them a mindset that they have the freedom to conduct their lifestyle in any manner they wish. Also, when athletes become part of the team atmosphere they develop a unique bond among their team members. The book points out that the bond causes team members to conform to the behaviors around them, which may result in gang rape. Statistics show, that between 1986 and 1996, 33% of alleged sexual assaults among college and professional athletes involved multiple perpetrators.(pg. 4).

Chapter three, entitled *Easy Prey*, tells an alarming story about a woman, Linda Frenzel (actual name undisclosed), who was raped by multiple athletes on the New Orleans Saints football team who were held unaccountable for the incident. Frenzel regularly met athletes through her job as a waitress and via a friend who was a professional athlete. Frenzel did not consider herself a groupie; however, she frequented parties, clubs, and dorm rooms with athletes. She felt she understood the mentality and deviant lifestyles of athletes and trusted her judgment in determining whom she would spend the night with. After a frightening experience with an athlete on the Miami Dolphins, Frenzel did not underestimate her ability to detect an unsafe situation. Frenzel and her friend went on their annual trip to La Crosse, Wisconsin, where the Saints began their summer practice. While at a bar, Frenzel was invited to a party at the dorms and agreed with the expectation that she would sleep with one of the players she was with that night. However, upon entering the dorm room with one man, several men followed and forced Frenzel to have sex with them. After finally fleeing the scene, Frenzel

decided to press charges. The prosecutor, unfortunately, was unconvinced that the credibility of the witness was sufficient to convince a jury beyond a reasonable doubt that sexual relations with various Saints players was not consensual.

As the book progresses, it is apparent that the author wants to impress upon his readers the seriousness of the violent behaviors of athletes. In numerous instances Benedict reinforces how difficult it is for victims to pursue an effective case against athletes. The illustrations involve victims who were submissive, naïve, groupies, girlfriends, fiancés, and wives. Ironically, in each situation the results appeared almost identical in that players were rarely convicted or disciplined, and if they were found guilty of a crime and imprisoned, they continued the violence when released.

This book not only displays the violent behaviors of athletes and the pronounced injustices, it also discusses the consequences of these behaviors on the players themselves and those they love. Chapter nine, entitled *Sexually Transmitted Disease*, stresses that although athletes possess the attitude that they are invincible, they are not immune to diseases such as HIV. Magic Johnson commented that he knew unprotected sex was reckless, but believed, as other athletes do, that it would not happen to them. Unprotected sex subjects both or all partners to numerous infections. The disturbing part is when an athlete, who contracted a disease, passes the infection to his girlfriend or wife.

Benedict's purpose in his research and writing is not to demonstrate that athletics causes violent behavior, but rather to portray the inability of an athlete to manage newfound fortune and fame. Athletes, through their strenuous training, strong physique and goal oriented training, believe that they are entitled to whatever they want and will go to whatever lengths to achieve it. Further, some fans are willing to overlook the deviant behaviors of their favorite athletes, which is counterproductive to the type of discipline that athletes deserve for violent behavior. Fans need to focus on athletes' performance off the field as well as performance on the field.

In the final chapter, Benedict provides three proposals in order to curb the problem that continues to plague athletics, which is violence against women. First, impose a code of conduct on athletes to deter all criminal behavior. Second, discipline athletes for violating the code of conduct. Finally, screen athletes to identify violent behaviors. Benedict does not believe that his proposals will end the problem of violence

against women, but at least they will provide incentives for athletes to abide by the law.

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