

Sports Culture: Advancing the Role it Can Play in Healthy Manhood

*By Tony Porter
A Call To Men*

As a man who has worked with high school, collegiate and professional sports for many years I am convinced that sports culture can have a major impact on promoting healthy manhood. When defining sports culture we can come up with many conflicting messages and teachings. For example, sports culture teaches aggression, domination, power, no fear, no pain, etc... But it also teaches; team work, commitment, loyalty, dedication and integrity. Sports culture has been known to teach win at all cost. Sports culture also teaches many principle of good sportsmanship. The challenge that's ahead of us is how do we hold on to the wonderful aspects of sports culture that teach teamwork and commitment and let go of the aspects promoting less value in women and heterosexism.

We can begin by having critical conversations of how manhood is far too often taught to men and boys through a lens that requires distancing oneself from the perceived experiences of women and girls. These conversations must also address that distancing also requires men and boys to develop a lack of interest in the experiences of women and girls.

From birth to about age five we (meaning a male dominated society) have a tendency to allow little boys to share equally in the same experiences as little girls. From about age five to ten we began to instill in the socialization of boys the importance of distancing themselves from girls to define their manhood. What we see at this time is boys displaying a dislike for girls (lack of interest), wanting to have little to do with them, outside of teasing, often as a means to acknowledge their growing distaste.

Around the age of sixteen boys become physical attracted to girl. Keeping in mind that since the age of five they have been taught to have a lack of interest. So we (again a male dominating society) at this time make an exception for our boys. They are allowed to have interest in the experience of girls related to sexual/physical attraction. Granted I'm not a sociologist or psychologist, but the truth of matter is the average eighteen year old heterosexual young man has limited interest in the average eighteen year old heterosexual young women outside of sexual conquest. There are no absolutes, we are not talking about an exact science, but we are talking about reality. The truth of the matter is you take an average eighteen year old heterosexual young man his interest in the average eighteen year old heterosexual young woman doesn't extend to far past sexual conquest. He's a good kid, I'm not taking a position at all about his character or integrity; the truth nevertheless is based on his socialization from birth to eighteen if you take sexual conquest off the table his interest in her plummets.

I know I'm leaning hard into this whole issue of lack of interest in women and girls. The truth of the matter is I believe it's extremely important when viewing aspects of sports culture. In sports culture far too often we motivate boys to do their best by devaluing and sometimes dehumanizing girls. In sports culture we unfortunately have a history of heterosexism that has denounced and devalued the LGBTQ and non-gender conforming communities. As a result of these norms in sport culture we find ourselves holding boys hostage to hyper notions of masculinity when it not who they are or in many cases want to be, but feel society is demanding it of them.

A society that teaches a lack of interest in women and girls also limits a holistic experience of development for boys to men. A society that teaches a lack of interest in women and girls contributors to the foundation of men's violence against women. We know that today men's violence against women is at epidemic proportions, it's one of the leading causes of injury to women in our country. Sports culture may be the single handed most influential institution in our society

Sports are an amazing institution in our society and one of the major influencers of male socialization. Sports are paramount in the development of boys to men. This is regardless of whether they play sports or not. Think of the time spent between youth sports and professional sports, for most men it's a lifetime of daily participation on one level or another.

This year more than any other I believe there is a collective challenge being taken on by those with influence over sports culture, be it commissioners of our professional sport leagues or athletic directors and coaches on a collegiate and high school level. I'm encouraging us all to find our place in this moment in history. Find our place and be on the right side of history. This is an opportunity in time for us all to get on the same page with a much more comprehensive definition of manhood. Sports culture and those who influence it have the opportunity in front of us to better promote equality. The opportunity is here to deepen our understanding of humanity and violence against women and girls. This is also an opportunity for men to understand the need for our collective healing. An opportunity for men to understand that there is a collective liberation for us all.