

Factors That Influence Criminal Behavior of Athletes

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Rape, drug abuse, domestic violence, possession, DUI, assault – These are the crimes we see tacked onto the same headlines with the names of our nation’s favorite athletes. Athletes who have won championships, represented our country, and played for our favorite teams. The same athletes we have admired and who may have been the reasons for many decisions to participate in sports in the first place. But unfortunately, no matter how ‘great’ these athletes are, many of them have chosen to engage in criminal activities. In an article published in *The Sociology of Sport Journal* Eldon Snyder (1994) references several studies which support the theory that “...sports build character, [and] through sports participation young people internalize the values and norms of conventionality and thus are taught to be good citizens.” So, based on this argument, these athletes who have dedicated their entire lives to discipline and training should know better than anyone how to ‘follow the rules’. Apparently Mike Tyson, O.J. Simpson, Charles Barkley, Michael Vick, Tonya Harding, and the staggeringly long list of other athletes who have committed serious crimes, must have missed that memo. Despite all that they had ‘learned’ through their involvements in sports, their nearly unlimited resources, and the incredible influence they have, these athletes choose to behave in ways that are completely unacceptable. *The Sociology of North American Sport* has many examples of such behaviors which are discussed in chapter seven. For instance, from the spring of 2005 to spring of 2006 over fifty NFL players were arrested (Eitzen & Sage, 2009). As of 2002, four out of every ten NBA players have a police record involving very serious crimes including armed robbery, domestic violence, gun possession, and rape (Eitzen & Sage, 2009). In addition, an essay printed in *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* states that in a recent February the media reported some sort of misbehavior by a professional athlete at least twenty-two out of twenty-

eight days (Young & Parloe, 2009). These statistics seem to show that athletes, with the world at their finger tips and all the potential anyone could hope for, are finding themselves in more trouble with the law than ever before. Of course these athletes must take responsibility for their own actions - no one forced them to become criminals; however, our society plays a large role in influencing, and possibly even reinforcing, their bad behavior through factors such as “Spoiled-athlete syndrome”, success through aggression, and external conformity.

Steven Ortiz (2006), a sociology professor at Oregon State University, places blame for the reckless behavior of athletes on what he calls “Spoiled- athlete syndrome”. He suggests that this problem “... begins early in sports socialization. From the time they could be picked out of a lineup because of their exceptional athletic ability, they've been pampered and catered to by coaches, classmates, teammates, family members and partners. As they get older, this becomes a pattern. Because they're spoiled, they feel they aren't accountable for their behaviors off the field. They're so used to people looking the other way” (Ortiz, 2006). Athletes who suffer from this ‘syndrome’ have been pampered and coddled their entire lives thus giving them a sense of entitlement which causes them to feel as though they should not be constrained by the laws of society or even common decency. Our culture tends to ignore the misdeeds of accomplished athletes because we place much more emphasis on their abilities and success. When all is said and done, these athletes have had everything from play time to good grades handed to them and may not understand what it is like to be expected to behave as everyone else is expected to. The notion of Spoiled-athlete syndrome immediately brings to mind the incident in which Charles Barkley spat on an eight year old girl in 1991. Barkley’s initial response was that he was aiming for a heckler who sat near the young girl but missed because he was tired and did not have enough foam in his mouth (Merron, 2004). This explanation is dumbfounding. He sounded

completely unapologetic and it seemed as though he was simply justifying his behavior rather than admitting he had done something wrong and taking responsibility for it. Barkley did apologize later, but that easily could have been because of the backlash he received after the incident. Eventually, most of the world forgave Barkley for this mishap; but then he went on to throw a man out of a window during a bar fight, solicit sex to a stripper, receive multiple DUI's – one, recently, on his way to meet a prostitute -, be accused of rape, and gamble away astonishing amounts of money (Admin, 2004). But each time there were those in our society who continued to look past all of this because of his incredible athletic ability and what he had done for the sport of basketball. He has had the means to resolve all of his issues with the law and the talent for us to be forgiving, so he probably feels as though there is no real reason for him to alter his behavior. In chapter three of *The Sociology of North American Sport* the link between American sport and American values is discussed. The statements are made that “American values clearly affect American sport”, “...sport in society reinforces societal values”, and “this mutual reinforcement places sport squarely in the middle of society’s “way of life”” (Eitzen & Sage, 2009). American society values success, competition, materialism, progress, the valued means to achievement, as well as external conformity - and sport encompasses each of these. This is truly our “way of life” so we will do almost anything possible, including overlooking outlandish behavior by someone who has exuded and shown the worth of our values, in order to defend and uphold it.

The immense amount of value our society places on success also has a serious effect on the misbehavior of athletes. We place extreme importance on progress and, in sports especially, the ends almost always justify the means. One common technique used in North American societies to climb the ladder of success is aggression. Based on the ‘Aggression Socially Learned

Theory' aggression is learned through observation and reinforced "...through the interaction-socialization process" (Eitzen & Sage, 2009). Thus, when an athlete is immersed in the sports world they are typically bombarded with aggressive behaviors that are reinforced by coaches, teammates, and those who attend sporting events. In an article by Keeler (2007) aggression is presented as a negative personality trait that has a strong correlation with participation in sports. Aggression is typically enacted out of frustration and, According to Keeler "During an athletic contest, the potential for a frustrating situation is unlimited. Combine that with aggressive behavior that is rewarded by teammates, coaches, and parents, or vicariously learned from role models on television or during live contests, and the potential for aggression in sport rises exponentially". Aggression is found in many different sports and almost always seen as positive. When an athlete is aggressive it is perceived that they 'want it more', when they want it more they will try harder, and when they try harder, they will probably win; and "Americans want winners..." (Eitzen & Sage, 2009). The fact that all types of aggression are not only acceptable, but encouraged as well as reinforced in athletics, can prove to be very dangerous when it comes to an athlete's behavior off the field of play. Of course, aggression is much more prevalent in contact sports such as football, basketball, hockey, and boxing, so it is not too surprising that the athletes involved in these sports are usually the ones we see committing crimes. Chapter seven of *The Sociology of North American Sport* suggests that "combative sports are not channels for the discharge of aggressive tensions but rather seem to promote aggression" (Eitzen & Sage, 2009). Athletes involved in these types of sports have been taught that aggression is a good way to accomplish goals and not to let anything stand in their way. They believe they should do 'whatever it takes' in order to succeed. This premise would not be quite so terrible if all of their

goals were positive, but criminal athletes have proven time and time again that this is not the case.

Another societal value that can influence whether or not athletes become criminals is external conformity. Within our society there consists subcultures with their own sets of rules, norms, and values, but the basis of external conformity is visible in each. According to *Sociology of North American Sport* “we seek the approval of our colleagues and therefore try to be successful by some shared standards of achievement or conformity” (Eitzen & Sage, 2009). In Snyder’s (1994) case study based on a burglary ring made up of nine wealthy college athletes, who had no need for the items they stole or money they could have made selling them, he attempts to explain their deviance by exploring the aspect of peer pressure. Snyder (1994) quotes one of the athletes attorneys who stated that his client “...attempted to gain the esteem of his friends by participating in these thefts, if not by out-striving them in committing the crimes”. The report goes on to say that statements such as this indicate that these athletes participation in sports “...promoted the relationships and social pressure to participate in the criminal activities” (Snyder, 1994). The sociological need to fit in can motivate young people to do almost anything. People do not want to feel that they are outcasts and aim to always be a part of some kind of group that they can identify with. This often entails agreeing with an opinion or participating in an action that one would not otherwise choose to.

External conformity is also a factor in the many professional and collegiate athletes who have faced allegations of rape and sexual assault. Our society is still largely patriarchal and we put enormous emphasis on the need for males to be masculine. In a report published concerning the Duke lacrosse players who were accused of rape, Barbara Barnett of Kansas University

discusses the constructs of hegemonic masculinity and how some "...scholars have suggested the presence of hyper masculine subcultures that glorify violence and accept force or coercion in sexual relationships as normal, instinctive, and exciting" (Barnett, 2008). Barnett goes on to explain that sports is an area in which hyper masculine values are reinforced and encouraged and that displays of aggression on the field may spill over into the athletes everyday lives (2008). This is not to say that all male athletes are capable of this behavior, but the ones who have displayed it may hold this opinion.

Sport participation is in no way the cause of criminal behavior and these views do not take away from the fact that each individual is, and must always be, responsible for his or her own actions. However, it is clear that a number of our societal values do contribute to the fact that many athletes feel entitled to behave in any way they want to. There are many people who have and always will spoil talented athletes. There are those who push these athletes to be aggressive and do whatever it takes to accomplish their goals. And, as outdated as some of them may be, we do value conformity to our belief systems. The principles of success, aggression, and conformity each have the potential to be beneficial to North American society, but they can easily be reinforced in negative ways as well.

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