



SPORTS OF THE TIMES

Indulging Athletes Isn't Class Matter

By HARVEY ARATON
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AN Internet search for "lacrosse" and "inner city" generates a surprising range of results, from a middle-school league in Philadelphia to a group called Black Lax Inc. in Baltimore to reports of a recent game between club teams from the historically black universities Morgan State and Howard.

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A telephone call to United States Lacrosse, the sport's eight-year-old national governing body, afforded its executive director, Steve Stenersen, the opportunity to extol the group's "absolute commitment to grow the game not just across racial lines but across socioeconomic lines" through a program it calls Bridge Lacrosse.

If you're paying close attention, this may be akin to watching grass grow on a pristine lacrosse field. Demanding considerable financial investment for equipment and space, the sport is not likely to shed its reputation as suburban and affluent soon. Perhaps never, given its increasingly overdone portrayal as the unsupervised playground of the privileged, and the hackneyed extrapolation that the accusations brought by a 27-year-old woman that she was sexually assaulted last month by three Duke players are related to where and in what size house they grew up.

"It troubles me, the way the media has been falling back on old stereotypes," Stenersen said in a recent interview. "Clearly, the details in the Duke case indicate that poor choices were made and may have resulted in a tragedy. But does this story get juicier when you play up that these kids are from a so-called preppy background? Does it make it more divisive?"

Stenersen, who has a journalism degree from the University of North Carolina, where he played on national championship lacrosse teams in 1981 and 1982, said: "I think it does, and that's a sad commentary on where we are as a society."

Somehow, what ZIP codes the players' families live in, what high schools they attended, what they wear and, yes, the color of their skin are supposed to be clues as to why they developed reputations as devilish Dukies, and why two or three could end up in jail. Sound familiar? It's the same character trial-by-appearance and cultural typecasting we get when the finger of the accuser points to the African-American male with tattooed biceps and cornrows.

The unifying thread, the color- and class-blind college sports culture of indulgence, gets trampled and torn in the haste to pigeonhole and polarize.

"I think there's no question that the negative influences that start with the pros and are clearly ingrained in college sports have blurred or eliminated cultural lines," Stenersen said. "And I wouldn't for a minute try to say that lacrosse is different than any other sport or that its kids don't face the same issues and challenges."

Given the dynamics and demographics in Durham, N.C., class and race have become unavoidable subplots in the Duke case. But if growing up privileged (read: pampered to the point of being poisoned) explains what set the wheels of this sad story in motion, what, then, is the social genesis when the perpetrators are basketball and football players from poor or working-class homes?

If financial means is the common denominator for those who refuse to surmount the unholy team code of silence and can still count on unfailing support from clueless community officials and university administrators who ignore early behavioral warning signs, to what do we attribute the long list of athletic department lockdowns that have typically followed the sexual assaults that are as endemic to the big-time college sports machine as the recruiting rat race?

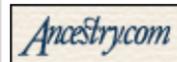
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While Stenersen said, "The sport has never had to weather such an episode in its history," it could be that lacrosse, despite not being an almighty revenue producer, has carved out its own preferred stature at the country's traditional powers, given its unambiguous upscale marketing appeal. Again, that would only tell us lacrosse has become a member at some universities of the Great Sports Entitlement Society that excludes no one based on class, color or creed.

In my northern New Jersey suburban community, lacrosse is unquestionably hot. Just the other day, the local high school played at Delbarton, the Roman Catholic school that graduated five players to the current Duke roster, including Reade Seligmann, one of those indicted this week. But what struck me when I checked for the time of the game on our school's Web site was how many of the standard sports opponents from neighboring working-class towns and cities were absent from the schedule. At those schools, lacrosse does not exist, despite Stenersen's assertion that it is the fastest-growing sport at the high school and college levels.

He reminded us that lacrosse, with 350,000 to 400,000 players nationwide, is an ancient game but only in its administrative and expansion infancy.

The severe growing pains induced by Duke may represent something much more troubling than a single event, but playing the preppie card is the trite and wrong way to address it. After making a flippant and largely uninformed remark about the sport in a recent column, I wished for a do-over after noticing a lacrosse stick in my front yard the other day.

My son dropped out after one season, uncomfortable with all that expensive equipment, but the reminder hit home. Harsh and inevitably unfair stereotypes are harder to make or take when it's your street, your circle, your town.

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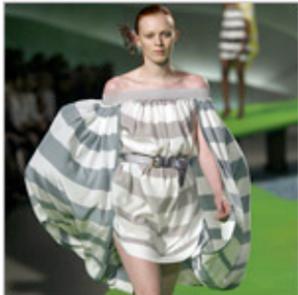
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