

**SPORT  
CULTURE  
SOCIETY**

**Vol. 9**

# The Dark Side of Sports

**Exposing the Sexual Culture  
of Collegiate and Professional Athletes**



**Nick T. Pappas**

**MEYER  
& MEYER  
SPORT**

Sport, Culture & Society, Vol. 9

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## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to athletes who strive for excellence and promote it both on and off the field of competition.

## **ABOUT THE SERIES – SPORT, CULTURE & SOCIETY**

The Sport, Culture and Society series deals with issues intersecting sport, physical activity and cultural concerns. The focus of the book series is interdisciplinary, ground-breaking work that draws on different disciplines and theoretical approaches, such as sociology, philosophy, cultural anthropology, history, cultural studies, feminist studies, postmodernism, or critical theory. The Sport, Culture and Society series seeks to reflect both, the variety of research concerns from a multi-disciplinary perspective and discussions of current topics in sport and physical activity and their relationship to culture.

### **The editors:**

Karin Volkwein-Caplan (USA), Keith Gilbert (UK), and Jasmin Tahmaseb McConatha (USA)

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## Introduction: An Insider Perspective

Pick up a newspaper, sports magazine, or turn on the television or Internet, and it is not uncommon to find athletes appearing in the news headlines because of their involvement in aggression and violence. While some of this negative behavior takes place within sports competition, not all athlete aggression is restricted to sports opponents. The past two decades have witnessed increasing documentation of athlete aggression outside the sports arena that has been directed against both males as well as females in a variety of settings.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, athletes have also appeared in the media for their participation in an array of sexually deviant and/or aggressive practices.<sup>2</sup> Incidences involving golf superstar Tiger Woods' infidelity, The Minnesota Vikings' Sex Boat Scandal, and Duke University lacrosse players' alleged gang rape all generated national interest because the cliché "sex sells" is particularly true when it involves elite-level athletes. Although such situations raise numerous questions about the extent of these and other sexual behaviors, research investigating the sexual culture of elite-level athletes remains very limited in scope aside from incidences involving reported sexual assaults. In addition, journalistic reporting of athletes' sexual deviancy often reveals little beyond "tip of the iceberg" events the media are fortunate to report. Over the years, a host of deviant sexual practices have remained hidden within impenetrable and diverse athlete cultures that are slow to reveal their secrets to outsiders, including researchers, who are often unaware that such behaviors even exist.

My unique position as an insider, however, has enabled me to gather cutting-edge research that has superseded this glimpse to reveal both shocking and disturbing information highlighting athletes' clandestine sexual practices. While athletes' physical and/or sexual assaults surfacing in the news often coincides with negative publicity and outcomes for the victim and the offender(s), an array of concealed sexual behaviors never receive media attention. This is problematic because seemingly harmless sexual behaviors that are often overlooked when they are not illegal can, in fact, negatively impact lives as well as become stepping stones to more pronounced forms of sexually deviant and/or aggressive practices that are against the law. The fact that certain types of sexual deviancy have thrived without attention for nearly 50 years and have seldom been disclosed in print – much less with a population of elite-level athletes – means the book that you are about to read will shine a large spotlight on collegiate and professional athletes' unique sexual culture.

I became aware of athlete sexual deviancy during my career as a collegiate and professional hockey player and coach. Formal data collection for this research began in the summer of 2001 when I conducted in depth interviews for my

doctoral dissertation on 23 collegiate and professional hockey players' out-of-sport aggression.<sup>3</sup> Because the sexual deviancy I uncovered did not always lead to unlawful aggression, I withheld these significant findings for future use. In order to show these practices were widespread within other sports cultures, I interviewed an additional 119 collegiate and/or professional athletes from other athlete cultures including major leaguers, National, and/or Olympic Team members. Wrestlers, hockey, baseball, basketball, and football players comprise the study's main participants; however, various participants revealed awareness throughout this study that male athletes representing virtually every collegiate sport also engaged in a variety of sexually deviant and/or aggressive behavior. Using in-depth interviews with this large and diverse sample also enabled me to gather frequencies related to certain behaviors, processes describing how they occur, motivation for participating, and detrimental outcomes related to a host of negative sexual practices occurring at all levels of athletic competition. While participants often observed such practices among high school athletes, this research will highlight collegiate and professional athletes' involvement in sexually deviant and/or aggressive behaviors that occurred during careers spanning the early 1960s-2010. The findings in this book and the fact that we live in a world where athletes are held in high regard establish that longstanding sexual deviancy and aggression must be exposed because what people do not know can hurt them and countless others.

Out-of-sport athlete aggression, as defined in this study, is illegal behavior that involves physical and/or sexual assaults. Sexual aggression includes sexual assault (i.e., nonconsensual petting, oral/anal sex, sexual intercourse, and penetration with objects through the use of force, argument, pressure, drugs, or alcohol) and/or rape (i.e., nonconsensual penile-vaginal penetration through the use or threat of force).<sup>4</sup> Athlete sexual deviancy and/or sexually deviant behaviors include an array of perverted and seedy sexual practices that are demeaning and harmful. While deviancy is defined as an abnormality differing from accepted standards, certain sexual behaviors routinely occurring suggest such practices may be considered normal within various athlete cultures.<sup>5</sup> However, because "normal" in this sense does not make negative practices acceptable, deviancy may not be the most appropriate term; but for lack of a better word it will suffice.

## HOW I BECAME AN INSIDER

Like many youngsters, I had aspirations of becoming a professional athlete from an early age growing up in the Chicago/Northern Indiana area. After a successful high school hockey career which included a season of junior hockey my senior year, I played the following season on both Canadian Junior A (tier II) and Junior B hockey teams in Quebec and Ontario. The next year, I attended

Division I Bowling Green State University and made the hockey team as a freshman “walk-on.” My freshman class at BGSU showcased their talent by winning the 1984 Division I National Championship as seniors. I played one year of varsity hockey at BGSU before I was cut, so I spent my sophomore season playing on the university’s club hockey team. The following year I transferred to Penn State University because it enabled me to play immediately on a high-level non-varsity collegiate hockey team that regularly competed against Division I, II, and III varsity teams. During three seasons at PSU, my team won a National Championship and placed runner-up twice while I earned the Most Valuable Player Award and a Bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education my senior year. It was an honor to be inducted into the Penn State Hockey Hall of Fame and the Andean High School Sports Hall of Fame in 2004.

After college, I followed my childhood dream by playing five years of minor professional hockey. My first three seasons were spent playing on three minor league championship teams, and I was the team captain during my third season. I gained invaluable experience during my second and third championship seasons when I was coached by John Tortorella, who later went on to coach the NHL’s Tampa Bay Lightning when they won the Stanley Cup in 2004. My final two seasons of professional hockey were spent in Europe playing first in Skovde, Sweden and then in Copenhagen, Denmark as a player-coach. In the end, I was very satisfied with my professional career because I felt I had played to my full potential.

After retiring as a professional athlete, I spent the next three years working first as a high school teacher and hockey coach and then as an adolescent counselor in group homes for troubled teenagers. I left this position to become an assistant coach for the Ohio University Men’s Ice Hockey Team while I attended graduate school. In three years, I helped lead the Bobcats to back-to-back League, Playoff, and National Championships. During this time, I also interned as a high school and substance abuse counselor en route to earning my master’s degree in school, college, and community mental health counseling.

I worked the next two years as a school counselor before returning to complete a doctorate degree in Human Development and Family Science with a minor in Sociology of Sport from The Ohio State University. As a doctoral student, I taught counseling classes to college seniors and was the head coach of the OSU Women’s Club Hockey Team for four years. Upon finishing my degree, I coached a season of professional hockey as an assistant for the Johnstown Chiefs of the East Coast Hockey League, which was the AA affiliate for the NHL’s Calgary Flames, in addition to teaching undergraduate and graduate-level classes as an adjunct professor. Overall, I have 25 years of consecutive coaching experience as an ice hockey camp instructor, and I have been part of six championship teams during my elite-level hockey career – two as a

collegiate coach, three as a minor professional athlete, and one as a collegiate athlete. My present work with athletes includes personal/athletic life coaching and providing presentations on athlete-related issues including out-of-sport deviancy and aggression in order to promote personal and team excellence.

I have presented my athletic, academic, and occupational background because research for this book began during my junior, collegiate, and professional hockey career, and it continued as a coach, teacher, counselor, graduate student, professor, and researcher. The past 30 plus years have provided me with unique experiences and insight into the sexual culture of collegiate and professional athletes. I have found that elite-level athletes and coaches often receive a thorough education to the hidden, darker practices occurring within their own sports culture as well as other athlete cultures that they happen to come into contact with. My insider perspective as a player and coach in combination with over 13 years of formal study and research involving out-of-sport athlete deviancy and aggression that has included interviews with over 142 athletes has thoroughly prepared me to examine this unique and controversial material. While some readers without elite-level athletic experience may question – or dispute – certain findings within these pages, I believe the majority of collegiate and/or professional athletes and coaches, who are not living in denial or a protected, secluded bubble, will support this work and acknowledge its value as a beneficial component for risk management.

## **PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Detailed interviews conducted in person and by phone were used to gather information for this book at several different time periods. Preliminary academic research initially began in 1999 when I conducted five interviews for a graduate class project which would later become a published study on collegiate/professional hockey players' out-of-sport aggression.<sup>6</sup> This work set the stage for the first major wave of interviews which occurred in the summer/fall of 2001 during my doctoral dissertation involving 23 collegiate and/or professional hockey players' out of sport physical and sexual aggression. The interview questions built upon the previous study and included questions about athletes' sexual deviancy. Approximately 85% of the participants in this book were interviewed in the second wave of data collection which began in the fall of 2005 and ended about the same time in 2010. The study's questionnaire originated from my doctoral dissertation although I added additional questions that focused specifically on certain types and frequencies of sexually deviant practices which sometimes emerged as the study progressed.<sup>7</sup> Percentages related to various motives detailed within the chapters sometimes total more than 100% because participants often identified multiple influences for certain behaviors.

Player interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 3½ hours with most averaging about 1½ hours in duration. Athletes were referred to the study by numerous sources which included other athletes, coaches and managers, team staff and/or affiliates, previous participants, and numerous friends and acquaintances. Moreover, participants provided information from multiple perspectives which means the athletes described what they knew and/or observed among teammates or other athletes as well as what they personally engaged in and experienced. Essentially, the player narratives act as a window through which readers can peer into the hidden culture of elite-level athletes so they can observe the prevalence, processes, underlying causes and motivation, and the effects of a host of detailed sexual practices found within this sample of athletes.

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 58 at the time of their interview and averaged 35 years old; the most common ages (mode) were 31 and 35. The overall sample contained 142 collegiate and/or professional athletes; however, 27 athletes from each of the five sports totaling 135 participants were used to calculate the percentages that appeared in the different chapters (and keep the numbers even). Additional data from seven participants that were not used in the percentages included six hockey players from my dissertation data and one collegiate football. Similar numbers of players in their 20s (approximately one third of the participants), 30s (just over one third), and 40s (approximately one third) in addition to 1-2 athletes per sport in their 50s (4%) enabled me to examine, compare, and contrast athletes' experiences from different sports and eras. This means over two thirds of the participants competed and/or coached at the collegiate and/or professional level during 2000-2010 and/or 1990-1999, approximately 50% had similar athletic experiences during careers in the 1980s, 20% in the 1970s, and about 3% during the 1960s. Various participants had playing careers that overlapped two or even three different decades of time and when this included coaching experience, it could reach as high as five decades. Athlete sexual deviancy as well as aggression was discovered during every decade of competition from the early 1960s-2010.

Sixty-two percent of the participants had professional playing experience at the minor and/or major league level, and from this group approximately 40% had major league experience. In addition, over 90% of the participants competed at the collegiate level and approximately one third had elite-level coaching experience at the junior (i.e., hockey-related), collegiate, and/or minor/major league levels. This athletic experience was often quite recent because at the time of their interview, approximately 40% of the participants were currently competing or coaching at the collegiate or professional level. Following their interviews, most coaches continued in their careers with some receiving promotions to head coach or to the major leagues, while other participants who worked with elite-level teams in various capacities made their way into collegiate or professional coaching.



The 32 participants with major league experience were easily the most difficult to find and interview for the study. Many had trust issues from observing that athletes, including themselves, were often misquoted or even burned by journalists during their career. Consequently, big leaguers were often reluctant to participate and discuss their exclusive, hidden culture because they feared their names would be linked to what they had said. Despite such challenges, every sport in this study contained 7-9 confirmed major leaguers that combined for an average of 65 years of major league experience in *each* of the different sports. Consequently, there are high profile athletes and coaches representing every sport in this study. This includes numerous athletes who won championships at the collegiate, minor, and major league levels in addition to major league All-Stars, Hall of Fame Inductees, and National and/or Olympic Team Members. While wrestling contained no professionals because professional wrestling was considered entertainment and not a sport, the sample contained five National and/or Olympic Team Members including four International Medalists, 12 All Americans, two NCAA champions, and nine current collegiate coaches. In the end, the participants' extensive playing and/or coaching experiences at elite-levels were essential to my gathering the array of negative, clandestine behaviors that have thrived for decades with little or no attention.

## KEEPING EXPLANATIONS SIMPLE BUT NOT SIMPLISTIC

One of my goals and challenges during this project was to convey my unique findings in such a way that the information remained clear and in a reader-friendly format so that different interest groups could benefit from the material. This means the athletes' descriptions of the different practices were in their own words whenever possible, and this occurred in combination with my insights and other supplemented material to provide information and explanations using understandable language and ideas. I opted against using complicated theoretical perspectives that attempt to explain, but often confuse the understanding of a phenomenon in addition to severely limiting the readability of the material.

I discovered through years of research that athletes' sexual deviancy and aggression are learned within a variety of social environments and particularly bonded male peer groups such as athletic teams. Like all other social behaviors, humans learn deviant and aggressive acts by watching influential people (e.g., parents, peers, and athletes, etc.) model certain behaviors that are perceived as useful or rewarding.<sup>8</sup> Learning also occurs by observing the consequences of another's behavior, forming ideas about which behaviors are appropriate, trying out or practicing various behaviors, and continuing to use those behaviors if they bring positive or fulfilling results.<sup>9</sup> People may learn how to perform certain