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Dating Aggression, Sexual Coercion, and Aggression-Supporting Attitudes Among College Men as a Function of Participation in Aggressive High School Sports

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Aggressive male sports have been criticized as bastions of sexism and training grounds for aggression against women, but there have been few empirical demonstrations of these alleged relationships. The authors studied self-reported dating aggression and sexual coercion in 147 college men. Men who had participated in aggressive high school sports, as compared with other men, engaged in more psychological aggression, physical aggression, and sexual coercion toward their dating partners, caused their partners more physical injury, were more accepting of violence, had more sexist attitudes and hostility toward women, were more accepting of rape myths, and were less tolerant of homosexuality. Results indicate that participation in aggressive high school sports is one of the multiple developmental pathways leading to relationship violence.

Keywords: athletes; dating violence; rape myths; sexism

Since the rise of modern sports in the 19th century, it has often been assumed that sports provide many benefits to those who participate in them (Coakley, 2001, 2002; Crosset, 1990). There is an enormous amount of anecdotal and considerable empirical evidence for this assertion (Ewing, Gano-Overway, Branta, & Seefeldt, 2002). However, in the past two decades of the 20th century, three social influences...

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led to the examination of the often uncritical endorsement of sports as wholesome, character-building, prosocial activities. The first of these influences came from feminist scholars who began to argue that sports, particularly team sports, often reflect male hegemony, debase and objectify women, and encourage physical and sexual aggression against women (Benedict, 1997; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Nelson, 1994). A second influence was the work of family sociologists (e.g., Gelles, 1974, 1979; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980), who began to sensitize society to the enormous problem of violence between intimates, particularly wife battering. The third influence was the research by feminist scholars documenting the high rate of sexual coercion and date rape experienced by young women (e.g., Koss, 1988; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). These influences coalesced to produce popular and professional concern with the relationship between sports and violence against women. In this changed political climate, cases of domestic violence involving sports figures or sexual aggression by athletes—behaviors that had often been hidden, denied, or minimized in the past—began to receive attention in the mass media. Articles emphasizing the apparent relationships between athletic fame and violence against women appeared in the influential sports press (e.g., Nack & Munson, 1995), popular newspapers (e.g., Weir, 1990, 1995), and scholarly journals (e.g., Dabbs, 1998). Repeated stories in the popular media led to what appears to be the common belief that athletes are more likely to be violent toward women than are other men (Crosset, 2002; Dabbs, 1998).

There does not appear to be any clear empirical evidence of a relationship between participation in professional sports and violence against women (Blumstein & Benedict, 1999). However, there is empirical evidence of a relationship between participation in college athletics and dating aggression or sexual coercion. In a widely cited study of athletes at NCAA Division I schools, Crosset, Benedict, and McDonald (1995) found that athletes were overrepresented among students reported to university judicial affairs boards for sexual assault. The results of a study by Koss and Gaines (1993), showing that college athletes, particularly those in football and basketball, engaged in more sexual aggression and gang rape are also well known. Similarly, Frintner and Rubinson (1993) found that men on sports teams were greatly overrepresented among men engaging in sexual aggression. In their analysis of the data reported by Crosset et al. (1995), Crosset and Ptacek (1996) found that male athletes were greatly overrepresented among students reported to university judicial affairs boards for nonsexual assaults. In addition, at least two studies (Boeringer, 1999; Sawyer, Thompson, & Chicorelli, 2002) have shown a relationship between participation in team sports and acceptance of rape myths, a variable often related to sexual aggression (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). However, not all studies have reported an association between athletic team membership and aggression against women (for reviews, see Crosset, 2002; Messner & Stevens, 2002).

As others have noted (e.g., Crosset, 2002), both athletes and sports vary tremendously in their level of aggression and misogyny. Although football has been
described as a male initiation rite (Sabo & Pamepinto, 1990) and characterized as a bastion of misogynistic sexism (Nelson, 1994), it seems most unlikely that sports such as golf, figure skating, or tennis would be described in similar terms. It is known that sexual violence against women varies greatly among universities (Koss et al., 1987), and it is much more common among some athletic groups or some fraternities than among others (Humphrey & Kahn, 2000; Sanday, 1996a). This suggests that some sports will be more closely linked to aggression against women than will others, a hypothesis consistent with the results of Koss and Gaines (1993), and that the relationship between sports participation and aggression against women will be stronger at some schools than at others. For example, this relationship may be much stronger at leading NCAA Division I schools, with their numerous athletic scholarships, athletic dorms, nationally prominent teams, and large revenues from sports, than at much smaller schools where athletes are better integrated into the student body and sports are far less visible, prestigious, and income producing.

Examination of the values associated with highly aggressive sports, such as football and hockey, quickly identifies features that may be associated with aggression against women. For example, Kidd (1990) described the “gross sexism and homophobia of that inner sanctum of patriarchy, the locker room” (p. 42). Kidd, Curry (1991), Sabo and Pamepinto (1990), and many others have described the objectification of women, misogyny, homophobia, and admiration of violence associated with aggressive team sports. The similarities between these values and the values of rape-prone societies or institutions described by Sanday (1981, 1996b) are striking. In addition, an extensive literature has repeatedly demonstrated the relationship between these variables and violence against women, sexual coercion, and rape (for a review, see Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004).

Research and theory on sports participation and violence against women has focused on the victimization of college women or women associated with professional athletes. This focus may have the unintended effect of suggesting that the relationship between sports and violence against women is something that does not appear until a person gets an athletic scholarship to a Division I school or is selected in the professional draft. This is certainly not the case. It is clearly established that aggression against women appears long before college age (for recent large-scale studies of dating aggression in younger populations, see DeKerseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Kann et al., 2000; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001).

White, Donat, and Bondurant (2001) emphasize the importance of understanding violence against women from a developmental perspective. Experiences in college or professional sports may be important ways of reinforcing preexisting attitudes, but as Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, and Porche (2003) have shown, hostility toward women, objectification of women, admiration of violence, and other attitudes associated with aggression against women are acquired long before people reach college age. One of the adolescent experiences that may encourage the development of these attitudes or in other ways influence the developmental pathways to relationship
aggression is participation in highly aggressive sports in high school. This participation may expose adolescent males to role models of the kind of aggressive, misogynistic, and homophobic masculinity that Malamuth and his associates (Malamuth, 1998; Malamuth, Heavey, & Linz, 1993; Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Aker, 1995; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991) have linked to aggression against women. High school exposure to these attitudes may be particularly influential because this is a developmentally important time when adolescent males are seeking to demonstrate their conformance to rigid and traditional male gender roles while simultaneously establishing their first romantic relationships with women (Maccoby, 1998). The high frequency of dating aggression during this time (e.g., Kann et al., 2000) may reflect the difficulties in these demanding, complex, and sometimes contradictory tasks. Unfortunately, there do not appear to be any published empirical studies of the role of high school sports participation in forming attitudes toward women or of the relationship between high school sports participation and subsequent violence against women.

If participation in aggressive sports is one of the many developmental pathways that may lead to relationship aggression and sexual coercion, it is important to identify some of the specific elements that may lead to this outcome. Presumably, the pathway from athletic participation to relationship aggression is mediated by changes in attitudes about aggression; rigid attitudes about gender differences in rights, roles, and privileges (sexism); attitudes about sexual coercion; and hostility toward women. If this is the case, there should be measurable differences on these variables between participants in aggressive sports and participants in less-aggressive sports or nonathletes. Specifically, men’s participation in aggressive sports should be associated with greater acceptance of violence as a problem-solving technique, greater hostility toward women, greater acceptance of rape myths, greater sexism, and reduced tolerance for homosexuality.

We investigated the relationship between participation in high school aggressive sports and dating aggression, sexual coercion, and selected attitudes in college men. It was hypothesized that college men who participated in aggressive high school sports, relative to men who did not participate in these sports, will

1. Engage in more psychological aggression toward their dating partners
2. Engage in more physical aggression toward their dating partners
3. Engage in more sexual coercion
4. Cause a greater level of physical injury to their dating partners
5. Be more accepting of violence as a problem-solving technique
6. Have greater hostility toward women
7. Be more accepting of rape myths
8. Have stronger sexist beliefs, particularly sexist beliefs involving hostility toward women
9. Have more negative attitudes about homosexuality
Method

Participants and Procedures

The participants were 182 men in 28 sections of freshman composition classes at a small, private, Midwestern university. The university is an NCAA Division III school. There were no athletic scholarships offered, and athletics were not very visible on campus. Data were collected during the regular class period in the middle of the spring semester. Participants were not compensated, and all responses were anonymous. All participants were informed in writing, and again in oral instructions, of their right to refuse participation at any time. Sixteen students declined to participate.

Answer booklets from 9 participants were discarded because of excessive missing data or a failure to follow instructions. Because the purpose of the study was to investigate relationship aggression, data from participants who indicated they had never been involved in a romantic relationship (n = 26) were discarded. To increase sample homogeneity, data from the 1 participant older than 22 were also discarded. This left a final sample of 147 men. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 (M = 18.72, SD = 0.76); the majority (91.2%, n = 134) were European Americans, and all were unmarried.

Participants were asked to indicate which of 11 sports (baseball, basketball, soccer, golf, cross-country, football, swimming, track and field, wrestling, tennis, or other sport) they had participated in during high school. The majority of men (78.2%, n = 115) reported that they had participated in one or more sports in high school. Based on the frequency and intensity of physical contact, along with the potential to cause physical injury to the opponent, football, basketball, wrestling, and soccer were classified as aggressive sports. Using this classification system, 68.7% (n = 101) of the participants had played at least one aggressive sport in high school.

Measures of Relationship Aggression and Sexual Coercion

The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2; Straus, Hambly, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) was used as a measure of relationship aggression. For many years the original Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) was a commonly used measure of relationship aggression. In revising the scale, Straus and his associates attempted to address some of the most common criticisms of the measure (see Cook, 2002; Currie, 1998; Kimmel, 2002; Straus, 1990). The CTS-2 contains five scales (Negotiation, Psychological Aggression, Physical Aggression, Sexual Coercion, and Injury) that measure responses to conflicts in relationships by the respondent and the respondent’s partner. The CTS-2 was administered using the format and instructions provided by Straus et al. (1996). Straus et al. recommend the use of a weighted scoring system. Because most people engage in very little aggression and only a few
people engage in high levels of aggression, most measures of aggression are skewed. The use of a weighted scoring system exaggerates this and produces severe skewing. This skewing is not a problem if the CTS or CTS-2 is used as a clinical or screening instrument to identify highly aggressive individuals, but it is a problem in empirical research because it violates the assumptions of many inferential statistics. To minimize skewing, the scoring was modified by assigning a single point to any item answered in the affirmative and summing the points for each scale. Using this modified scoring system, reliabilities (Cronbach’s alpha) were Negotiation (self = .76, partner = .76), Psychological Aggression (self = .70, partner = .66), Physical Aggression (self = .76, partner = .80), Sexual Coercion (self = .66, partner = .61), and Injury (self = .78, partner = .77). These reliabilities are similar to or slightly lower than those reported by Straus et al.

### Measures of Sexism

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997, 2001) was used as a measure of sexism. Ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 2001) rejects the traditional view that sexism is simply a form of hostility toward women. Instead, Glick and Fiske (2001) argue that there are two reasonably independent forms of sexism. The first, hostile sexism, is similar to traditional views of sexism in that it justifies patriarchy, imposes sharp restrictions on women’s roles, and denigrates women. The second, benevolent sexism, idealizes women, traditional women’s gender roles, and men’s dependency on women. An example of benevolent sexism is the belief that women should be saved first in a disaster. This belief is certainly sexist, but it is hard to argue that it is hostile. These and other values associated with benevolent sexism often elicit feelings of protectiveness and affection toward traditional women, but these feelings and the actions they may elicit are based on perceptions of women’s inferiority. The 11-item Hostile Sexism and 11-item Benevolent Sexism Scales were answered on 7-point scales, and the answers were summed to produce a score for each scale. Similarly, all other attitude measures were administered and scored in this manner. The alpha for the Hostile Sexism Scale was .90, and the alpha for the Benevolent Sexism Scale was .81.

### Measures of Rape Myth Acceptance

Brownmiller (1975) identified a series of false beliefs about sexual coercion that are used to justify sexual violence and trivialize its effects on the victim. She described these beliefs as rape myths. Burt (1980) operationalized Brownmiller’s concept with the Rape Myth Scale. This scale has been extremely influential but, as Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994, 1995) indicated, it has serious conceptual and psychometric problems. Because of these problems, the 19-item Rape Myths Scale of Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1995) was employed in this study. This scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of .91.
Measure of the Acceptance of Violence and Hostility

Two other measures developed by Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1995) were also administered. The first of these was the 20-item Attitude Toward Violence Scale, a modification of a longer scale by Velicer, Huckel, and Hansen (1989), which measures the acceptance of violence as a legitimate approach to problem solving, particularly problems in interpersonal relations. This scale had an alpha of .88. Also administered was the Lonsway and Fitzgerald 10-item Hostility Toward Women Scale, a modification of the Hostility Toward Women and Hostility Toward Men Scales of Check, Malamuth, Elias, and Barton (1985). This scale had an alpha of .72.

Measure of Negative Attitudes About Homosexuality

The six-item Homonegativity Scale (Morrison, Parriag, & Morrison, 1999) was administered as a measure of negative attitudes toward homosexuals and homosexuality. This scale had an alpha of .75.

Presentation of the Measures

The measures in the present study were dispersed among the measures for two unrelated studies. The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and Homonegativity Scale were presented first. Then, after completing a series of unrelated items, the CTS-2 was completed. Finally, the participants completed, in order, the Attitudes Toward Violence, Hostility Toward Women, Hostility Toward Men, and Rape Myths Scales.

Results

Participants were separated into those who were involved with aggressive high school sports (football, basketball, wrestling, and soccer), those involved in other high school sports but not in aggressive sports, and those who did not participate in any high school sports. Fourteen men reported that they had participated only in sports that were classified as not aggressive. Because this group was too small for separate analysis, the other sports and the nonparticipating groups were combined to form a single comparison group of men who had not participated in aggressive high school sports.

There were 101 men in the aggressive sports group and 46 men in the comparison group. The number of participants in each of the aggressive sports was football \( (n = 57) \), basketball \( (n = 48) \), wrestling \( (n = 28) \), and soccer \( (n = 30) \). Because some men participated in more than one sport, these numbers exceed the number of participants in the sample. Scores for the men who had participated in aggressive high school sports and the comparison group of men are shown in Table 1.
Inspection of the results for the CTS-2 indicates that, as hypothesized, men who participated in aggressive sports reported that they used more psychological aggression, more physical aggression, and more sexual coercion in their college dating relationships than did men in the comparison group. Also as hypothesized, men in the aggressive sports group reported causing more physical injury to their partners.

Inspection of the CTS-2 partner scores indicates that men in the aggressive sports group reported that their partners exhibited more psychological and physical aggression against them. Comparisons on the attitudinal measures indicates that, as hypothesized, men in the aggressive sports group scored higher than did men in the comparison group on both measures of sexism and on the Acceptance of Violence, Hostility Toward Women, Rape Myth Acceptance, and Homonegativity Scales. All hypotheses for both the CTS-2 measures and the attitudinal measures were confirmed. The values of Cohen’s $d$ shown in Table 1 indicate that effect sizes for the CTS-2 measures generally fell in the low range. Effect sizes for the attitudinal

### Table 1

Scores of the Aggressive Sports and Comparison Group on Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2) and on Attitude Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aggressive Sport</th>
<th></th>
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<th>Comparison Group</th>
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<th>Cohen’s $d$</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
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<td>$N$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
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<td>CTS-2 Self</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>.97</td>
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<td>.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological Aggression</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>46</td>
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<td>1.73</td>
<td>2.20*</td>
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<td>101</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>2.18***</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual Coercion</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>2.50***</td>
<td>.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Injury</td>
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<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>2.19***</td>
<td>.36</td>
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<td>CTS-2 Partner</td>
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<td>46</td>
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<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.76</td>
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<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>2.33*</td>
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<td>Physical Aggression</td>
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<td>1.08</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.67</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hostile Sexism</td>
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<td>48.55</td>
<td>12.29</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>39.17</td>
<td>13.38</td>
<td>4.17****</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Benevolent Sexism</td>
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<td>44.43</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>39.04</td>
<td>11.54</td>
<td>2.74**</td>
<td>.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acceptance of Violence</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>66.63</td>
<td>19.27</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>58.00</td>
<td>17.95</td>
<td>2.44*</td>
<td>.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hostility Toward Women</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>34.41</td>
<td>8.78</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>30.57</td>
<td>7.97</td>
<td>2.42*</td>
<td>.76</td>
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<td>Rape Myths</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>43.56</td>
<td>18.69</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36.53</td>
<td>14.40</td>
<td>2.21*</td>
<td>.38</td>
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</table>

a. $t$ values are adjusted for unequal variances.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
measures were modestly higher, with two of the five measures falling in the moderate range.

Discussion

Aggressive sports have been repeatedly criticized as training grounds for sexism, misogyny, violence, and homophobia (e.g., Benedict, 1997, 1998; Curry, 1991; Messner & Stevens, 2002; Nelson, 1994; Whitson, 1990). Our results for the attitudinal measures are certainly consistent with this unflattering characterization. College men who participated in aggressive high school sports, in contrast to men who did not, scored higher on measures of sexism (particularly hostile sexism), were more accepting of violence as a means of solving problems, and were more accepting of rape myths. In addition, they were also more hostile toward women and had more negative attitudes toward homosexuality.

Role of Hostile Masculinity

One of the common threads that connects sexism, hostility toward women, acceptance of violence, and aggression against women is the concept of hostile masculinity as described by Malamuth and his associates (Dean & Malamuth, 1997; Malamuth, 1986; Malamuth et al., 1991, 1995). This concept evolved during a number of years and has been operationalized in different ways. Its central elements are hostility toward women, the belief in male superiority, and the belief that men should be dominant and aggressive. Malamuth et al. (1991), in an analysis of the 2,972 college men from the classic nationwide study of Koss et al. (1987), found that hostile masculinity was associated with sexual coercion. Similarly, in an important follow-up of men in Manitoba, Malamuth et al. (1995) found that hostile masculinity was associated with sexual coercion 10 years later. Our results show that central elements in hostile masculinity are associated with participation in aggressive high school sports.

Role of Rape Myths

We found that college men who played aggressive sports in high school were more accepting of rape myths. This finding is consistent with the results of Sawyer et al. (2002), who found that college men who participated in team sports endorsed more rape myths than did men who participated in individual sports, and Boeringer’s (1999) report that intercollegiate athletes endorsed more rape myths than did other men. Although there are occasional exceptions (e.g., Forbes & Adams-Curtis, 2001; Overholster & Beck, 1986), research has generally found relationships between the acceptance of rape myths and sexual aggression against women (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). The significance of this relationship was illustrated by Lanier’s
(2001) finding that high school boys who self-reported engaging in forced sexual activity endorsed more rape myths than did other boys. Most importantly, Lanier also found that high endorsement of rape myths was predictive of subsequent sexual aggression.

Taken as a whole, the results of the attitudinal measures indicate that college men who participated in aggressive sports in high school scored higher than did men in the comparison group on measures that have been both theoretically and empirically linked to psychological, physical, and sexual aggression against women (e.g., Forbes, Adams-Curtis, & White, 2004). These results confirmed all of our specific hypotheses about the attitudinal measures.

**Aggressive Sports and Dating Aggression**

Although it is of theoretical importance to demonstrate that participation in aggressive high school sports is associated with the attitudes and values men have as college freshmen, from a practical perspective it is much more important to know if participation in aggressive high school sports is related to aggressive and sexually coercive behaviors in college. Our results strongly indicate that this is the case.

**Self-reported aggression.** College men who participated in aggressive high school sports, in comparison with college men who did not, reported significantly more aggression toward their college dating partners on the CTS-2. This included more physical aggression such as hitting, pushing, or kicking and more psychological aggression such as name calling, yelling, and threatening behavior. In addition, college men who participated in high school aggressive sports, as compared with men who had not, reported that their aggressive actions caused their partners greater physical injury, such as bruising or bleeding. In view of the well-recognized problem of sexual aggression against college women (e.g., Koss et al., 1987), the finding that college men who participated in aggressive high school sports reported that they engaged in more sexually coercive behaviors, such as using threats or physical force to obtain sexual activity, is particularly important.

It is important to recognize that these results were found in a small, private, NCAA Division III school. This school has no athletic scholarships and no athletic dorms, and the school newspaper often laments a lack of student support for athletic teams and programs. These results indicate that the relationship between participation in aggressive sports and men’s psychological, physical, and sexual aggression against women is not limited to high-profile professional athletes or collegiate athletes at major Division I universities. Although certainly discouraging, these results should not be surprising. Sports are a product of a patriarchal society with deeply engrained sexism and misogyny. Those countless boys who have been admonished not to “throw like a girl” have received a minor lesson in baseball and a major lesson in misogyny. Only in a sexist and misogynistic culture could “acting like a girl” be a potent insult to males of almost any age and in almost any context. Aggressive sports, as McPherson (2002) and others have suggested, may exaggerate the sexism and the
narrow masculine roles of the society that nourishes them, but aggressive sports do not create misogyny, and they certainly do not have a monopoly on its perpetuation.

Aggressive sports participation and partner’s aggression. Men who participated in aggressive high school sports, as contrasted with men in the comparison group, reported that their partners engaged in more psychological and physical aggression toward them. Given these men’s self-reported psychological, physical, and sexual aggression against women, along with their sexism, misogyny, and rape-supporting attitudes, it seems likely that much of the psychological and physical aggression by their partners is in response to the aggressive actions and misogynistic attitudes of these men. However, at least one alternative explanation also seems likely. It is well established that most people are attracted to people much like themselves (Dwyer, 2000). This being the case, our results may reflect the simple phenomenon that aggressive men are attracted to aggressive women. These explanations are not mutually exclusive, and it is likely that both contribute to the relationship.

Implications and Limitations

Our results appear to be the first empirical demonstration that participation in aggressive high school athletics is associated with self-reported psychological, physical, and sexual aggression by college men. It is also one of the very few, possibly the only (see Crosset, 2002), published finding that participation in athletics at any age is associated with increased self-reports of nonsexual aggression against college women by college men. Although it is understandable why research has focused on participation in college sports, this focus often inadvertently minimizes the developmental nature of aggression against women. It also fails to recognize that dating aggression against high school girls is a very serious problem (e.g., Kann et al., 2000). In fact, high school girls are substantially more likely to experience sexual assault than are college women (Rennison, 2002). Our results indicate the importance of understanding and studying aggression against college women as simply one point in developmental pathways that begin in childhood and extend throughout the life span.

It is important to note that our sample was of men attending a small, private, NCAA Division III school. The sample was not representative of most intercollegiate athletes and certainly was not representative of athletes at large NCAA Division I schools. Although it can be argued that the observed effects would be expected to be greater in schools with prestigious, highly visible, and nationally competitive athletic programs, until the results have been replicated in such a population, they need to be generalized with appropriate caution.

The results are all consistent with the hypothesis that high school exposure to the blatant sexism, objectification of women, admiration of violence, and misogyny often associated with aggressive sports influences the likelihood of men engaging in dating aggression and sexual coercion when they reach college. However, it is very important to recognize that the retrospective design of the present study does not
allow for the determination of causal relationships. Our results simply indicate associations. It is certainly possible that other factors may account for both participation in aggressive high school sports and college dating aggression. For example, boys with strong hostile masculinity, a feature known to be predictive of later relationship aggression, may be attracted to aggressive high school sports. Although there are formidable pragmatic obstacles to prospective studies of relationship aggression, it is not possible to determine causal relationships or understand developmental processes without appropriate longitudinal studies.

It is also important to recognize that the absolute size of the differences found in this study were generally small. Similarly, the number of acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, or injury that were reported was small. This should not be surprising. After all, most college men, regardless of their background and experiences, do not physically or sexually assault their dating partners. These serious but statistically infrequent behaviors occur only with a confluence of many separate and complex attitudinal, situational, and societal variables. Participation in aggressive high school sports is simply one of many important influences in the multiple developmental pathways leading to relationship aggression.

References


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