

## ***Journal of Issues in* Intercollegiate Athletics**

### **Unsportsmanlike Conduct: College Football and the Politics of Rape**

By Jessica Luther. Published 2016 by Akashic Books, Brooklyn, NY. (247 pages).

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In *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: College Football and the Politics of Rape*, journalist Jessica Luther presents a concise analysis of college football's ongoing problems with sexual assault, using the metaphor of a college football playbook to frame the subject. Unlike a traditional playbook that outlines where players are supposed to move on a football field, Luther's book "is about a different kind of playbook – the one coaches, teams, universities, police, communities, the media, and fans seem to follow whenever a college football player is accused, charged, and/or convicted of sexual assault" (p. 26). By unpacking the playbook, the author exposes the ways in which the interrelated parts of the system have failed to address the severity of campus sexual assault and suggests changes that can be made to improve the system going forward.

Currently a fellow in the Texas Program in Sports and Media at the University of Texas in Austin, Luther writes frequently about sexual assault and women's issues for notable online sports outlets such as *Sports Illustrated*, *VICE sports*, *ESPNW*, *The Guardian* and *Bleacher Report*. She is as close to an authority on college football rape culture as any current journalist, having covered the Baylor rape scandal extensively for *Texas Monthly* magazine during the lead up to law firm Pepper Hamilton's audit that found university leadership actively worked to silence sexual assault victims and led to the May, 2016 firing of head football coach Art Briles and resignation of university president Kenneth Starr.

The book is divided into two parts, each representing a perspective of the playbook. The first part (chapters 1-5) explores the current playbook and how athletes, coaches, universities, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the media and fans have responded to sexual assault allegations within college football programs, and uses individual cases from the past 40 years to examine the responsibilities of each group in perpetuating the rape culture within sports. The second part of the book (broken down into thirteen separate plays) explores Luther's suggestions for ways that football programs, colleges, the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the media can change their playbooks to better serve the victims of sexual assault.

The first chapter explores the landscape in which the problem of campus rape culture exists, and the author uses the information collected from more than 115 college football sexual assault cases to formulate the book's thematic stories and data. Luther notes sexual assault is pervasive throughout many athletic departments, often occurring over many years, involving multiple participants or witnesses, and are shared collective experiences among teammates and communities involved with athletic programs.

The book's second chapter explores the historical phenomenon of intertwining race to criminality and rape culture and the perception that black men are naturally inclined to perpetrate sexual assault, what Luther identifies as "black men as the natural rapist" (p. 68). Furthermore, she notes accusers are most often presumed to be white women, many of whom are falsely assumed to be lying about being assaulted. The myth framing the discussion of college football rape culture, Luther states, is that there is a presumption that campus sexual assault is perpetrated by black males raping white women at incredibly high rates while white women are frequently presumed to be falsely accusing black male athletes of sexual assault. These two competing foundational myths, she argues, are interwoven into virtually every narrative involving athletic sexual assault.

Chapter three highlights the various distractions college football programs and athletic departments employ when confronted with sexual assault claims, a section in the playbook Luther refers to as "Nothing to See Here." The chapter explores how victims are silenced on college campuses, how coaches and administrators run interference between athletes and the legal system, and how athletic departments work closely with local police departments to minimize the risk that football sexual assault gets investigated. Luther argues through the complex web of victim silencing, ambivalent or complicit law enforcement agencies, and intentional interference by coaches and administrators, the culture of college football seeks to minimize or ignore the problem of athletic sexual assault in higher education.

The ambivalent reaction towards campus sexual assault from the NCAA is examined in the fourth chapter, where the author discusses how the national organization regulates thousands of issues related to college sports but conveniently ignores issues related to college football's rape culture. Luther discusses numerous highly publicized cases of sexual assault occurring during football recruiting visits and the sexualized role that all-female campus recruiting groups have taken in the recruiting process, and describes the NCAA as an organization disinterested in regulating morality in athletic departments or protecting the victims of the sexualized recruiting culture. As sexuality gets intermixed with recruiting, college football players learn to see women as sex objects and believe they are entitled to sexual prizes for being athletes. Luther argues the NCAA chooses to turn a blind eye to the culture of violence this attitude promotes.

The final chapter of Part One explores the media's responsibility in covering college football sexual assault cases and the tendency for sports writers to take the easy road and move on from stories about sexual violence. News organizations play a large role in shaping the public perception of college football and sexual assault, and when the media minimizes the responsibility of athletes for rape and other violent crimes, or simply chooses to ignore the problem entirely, it shapes the public conscience towards the issue. Luther uses examples of how the media contextualizes the actions of football players to either ignore their sexually violent backgrounds or to minimize the importance of their crimes, often focusing instead on how far the players have come since college or by emphasizing their positive traits.

The second part of *Unsportsmanlike Conduct* offers readers a chance to explore the possibilities that could exist within college football programs, athletic departments, higher

education and the NCAA to create environments where football rape culture is eliminated and what a new playbook could look like. The author describes a number of tactics that colleges need to emphasize such as sexual assault, victim trauma, and bystander awareness trainings. She encourages schools to empower their federal Title IX coordinators above protecting their financial interests and brands, and suggests holding coaches, athletics officials and college administrators responsible for sexual violence by firing university employees who tolerate that kind of behavior in their programs. She implores coaches and college athletes to teach their teams and teammates strong moral values and to take responsibility for their actions instead of putting winning on the football field above all else. Finally, she tasks the NCAA and the media with becoming active participants in solving the campus rape problem by using their authority over college sports and their clout with fans to expose the problem of sexual violence and put a stop to antiquated practices that sexualize women in the recruiting process and normalize the football rape culture.

*Unsportsmanlike Conduct* is a timely contribution to the growing body of research critically examining the role that college sports plays in society. The book fits nicely into the discourse of college sports and sexual assault highlighted by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering's documentary *The Hunting Ground* (2015), William Cohan's extensive analysis of the Duke Lacrosse sexual assault investigation, *The Price of Silence* (2014), and Jon Krakauer's examination of the campus rape climate at the University of Montana, *Missoula* (2015).