

## Sporting Masculinity on the Gridiron:

### Construction, Characteristics and Consequences

#### MASCULINITÉ DE SPORT SUR LE TERRAIN DE FOOTBALL:

#### CONSTRUCTION, CARACTÉRISTIQUES ET CONSÉQUENCES

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**Abstract:** This paper draws on interviews with 81 Canadian football players and administrators across junior, university, and professional football, as well as 20 published autobiographies of football players, to examine the development and consequences of sporting masculinity. In this paper, the concept of sporting masculinity is further developed and contrasted with other masculinities, particularly hegemonic masculinity. Various aspects of sporting masculinity in Canadian football are examined such as: the development of a male space, sentiments of superiority both on and off the field, body image issues, playing through pain and injury, analogies of war, and football as a total institution. This paper concludes with a discussion of the dangerous and harmful consequences of sporting masculinity to football players, as well the larger social issues that arise from this identity and the characteristics it can entail.

**Key words:** Sport; Masculinity; Violence; Qualitative Research

**Résumé:** Cet article s'appuie sur des entretiens avec 81 joueurs et administrateurs de football canadiens, dans le foot junior, universitaire et professionnel, ainsi que 20 autobiographies publiées par des joueurs de football, pour examiner l'évolution et les conséquences de la masculinité sportive. Dans cet article, le concept de masculinité sportive est développée par contraste avec d'autres formes de masculinité, en particulier la masculinité hégémonique. De divers aspects de la masculinité sportive dans le football canadien sont examinés, tels que le développement d'un espace masculin, les sentiments de supériorité à la fois sur et hors du terrain, les problèmes d'image corporelle, l'épreuve de douleur et de blessures, les analogies de la guerre, et le football comme une institution totale. Cet article se termine par une discussion sur les conséquences dangereuses et néfastes de la masculinité sportive vis-à-vis des joueurs de football, ainsi que de grandes questions sociales qui découlent de cette identité et les caractéristiques qu'elle peut comporter.

**Mots clés:** Sport; Masculinité; La violence; La recherche qualitative

“We have surrendered our identities to some stereotyped stallion gone mad. And the more this horse seems to be disappearing from our culture, the more fervidly we cling to the saddle. The new institutional representation and spokesman for this horse has become sport, especially football.” (Gary Shaw, 1972, p. 221)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous researchers have explored the central role of sport in creating and maintaining dominant forms of masculinity (Hall, 1985; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990; Sabo, 1985; Woodward, 2006). These researchers have argued that in sport, a particular form of masculine identity is developed through the legitimization of violence, various myths of heroism, and the exclusion of women. Sport allows men to display physical dominance and superiority; to run faster, jump higher, and hit harder than others on the field. The vast majority of literature pertaining to masculinity in sport examines sport in general, rather than the intricacies of masculine identity formation within specific sporting contexts. The aim of this paper is to

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explore various aspects of sporting masculinity in Canadian gridiron football including how it is constructed, what it is characterized by, and its often harmful consequences.

This study draws on 81 semi-directed qualitative interviews with junior, university, and professional football players and administrators across Canada, as well as the published autobiographies of 20 football players. The study began as an exploration of the legal issue of consent but the centrality of masculinity to the rules of interaction and behaviour in Canadian football became immediately clear during the research.

This paper opens with a brief discussion of the descriptive concept of sporting masculinity, as it is used in this study. Several aspects of sporting masculinity are then explored including: the separating out of men, sentiments of superiority both on and off the field, body image, playing with pain, paying the price for glory, analogies of war, and football as a total institution. This paper concludes with a discussion of the dangerous and harmful consequences of sporting masculinity to football players, as well the larger social issues that arise from this identity and the characteristics it can entail.

## **2. SPORTING MASCULINITY**

Masculinity can be defined as “a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (Connell, 1995, p. 71). Conceptions of masculinity are often constructed in opposition to stereotypical feminine traits of passivity, compassion, emotionality, weakness, and kindness. Hegemonic masculinity rests on characteristics of dominance, superiority, competitiveness, risk-taking, aggression, rationality, and the continuous quest for power (Connell, 1990). Contemporary gender theorists, such as Judith Butler (1990), have suggested that traditional male and female binaries have begun to erode allowing men and women increased options for acceptable gender representation. However, as the quote that opened this paper indicates, this binary continues to be created and reinforced in sport, particularly in football. As Gary Shaw (1972) notes, “the more this horse [hegemonic masculinity] seems to be disappearing from our culture, the more fervidly we [the institution of football] cling to the saddle” (p. 221).

The term sporting masculinity, as developed in this study, can be perceived as a distinct form of masculinity, which resembles hegemonic masculinity, but contains some distinct differences. The contemporary form of hegemonic masculinity is rooted in power and dominance, which ultimately provides men with greater opportunities for economic success in a market economy. Hegemonic masculinity benefits all men, regardless of whether specific men possess all of the desired qualities of the hegemonic male (Connell, 1995). The man who is not authoritative and built of a strong stature still benefits, simply because he is a man. Hegemonic masculinity exists at the top of a hierarchy of masculinity; it is the dominant form of masculinity among men and susceptible to change across time and cultural space (Connell, 1995).

Sporting masculinity, as will be revealed in this paper, has its own rules, roles, and consequences in Canadian football. It is not hegemonic masculinity, as it is not at the highest point of male power, authority, and recognition. Canadian football players are often in positions of marginalization and oppression within the institutional order of Canadian football (Fogel, 2009). The contemporary hegemonic male is the man at the top of this hierarchy of masculinity, who serves to marginalize and oppress others in the spirit of capital accumulation.

Football players display many of the characteristics of the hegemonic male, which reinforce traditional notions of masculine superiority that serve to benefit all men. Football can be seen as a celebration of male aggression, violence, physical dominance, and physiological superiority. In so doing, this celebration of masculine traits contributes to the subordination of women who are excluded from the sport and oppressed in a social order that venerates men. All men become beneficiaries in this gendered order, whether they have the physical power of a 240 pound linebacker or not.

Unlike the hegemonic male, football players must face the damaging health consequences of their masculinity, such as the effects of steroid use, catastrophic injuries, and concussions. As such, sporting masculinity might be better described as a type of subordinated or marginalized masculinity. The subordination faced by football players is not the same as the widespread subordination of women, however, players can be perceived as marginalized within the masculine institution of Canadian football.

## **3. SEPARATING OUT THE MEN**

Among the most pervasive themes expressed by the athletes and administrators who were interviewed in this study was the notion that football serves to separate out the men. Connell (1995) suggests that multiple masculinities and femininities are possible in a given social context, each with varying degrees of contextual appropriateness. In Canadian football, emphasis appears to be placed on a particular form of masculinity involving violence, aggression, power, and dominance. Those who do not exhibit these characteristics are given labels denoting their inferior masculinity or femininity.

From the moment players step on the field this distinction of manliness is apparent. Quoting a coach at his university tryout, Gary Shaw (1972) writes: "Some of you men will make it and some of you won't. We are here to separate the men from the boys" (p. 106). The coach suggests that all of the men at the tryout will make the team, and that those who do not possess inferior forms of masculinity; they are labelled as "boys." This sentiment is not just expressed by coaches, but appears to resonate with the players as well. Gary Shaw also noted that: "Football, by its own definition, is a test that separates men from boys" (p.108). It is unclear how the definition of football is inherently a test to separate men from boys; however, it is clear that some players might perceive football as such. Similar sentiments were expressed by players interviewed for this study. In describing the difference between playing high school and junior football, a CJFL wide receiver remarked: "there's no boys out on the field anymore." Commenting on hazing, a CFL quarterback stated: "we're all men here." Likewise, a junior defensive back stated: "It is a man's league. It is a man's sport."

The creation of a male space does not appear to be the only means in which players and administrators construct a hierarchy of masculinity in football, with only those at the top deemed suitable to play the sport. Men who do not live up to masculine rules on the football players can be labelled, or threatened with labels, that denote femininity. For instance, Dave Kopay (1977) writes: "The curse words on the football field are about behaving like a girl. If you don't run fast enough or block or tackle hard enough you're a pussy, a cunt, a sissy" (p. 53). Along similar lines, Dave Meggyesy (1971) writes:

He said I was 'afraid to stick my nose in there,' as he always put it, adding that I looked 'almost feminine' in making the tackle. This sort of attack on a player's manhood is a coach's doomsday weapon. And it almost always works, for the players have wrapped up their identity in their masculinity, which is externally precarious for it not only depends on not exhibiting fear of any kind on the playing field, but is also something that can be given and withdrawn by a coach at his pleasure. (p. 156)

Meggyesy (1971) provides an interesting example, where his coach uses the threat of feminine labels to push his players harder on the field to run faster, jump higher, and make more forceful tackles. Former professional football player Jerome Bettis (2007) notes a similar label used by players to motivate their teammates to display more traits of sporting masculinity. He writes: "Soft is the worst insult you can give another player. You're attacking his character, his manhood. You never want a soft player on your team" (p. 80).

Numerous players interviewed in this study indicated that players who do not display the appropriate masculinity on the field will likely be labelled as "gay" by teammates. When questioned about this, one university player remarked:

It's not that we think he really is gay or anything, it's just an expression. If a guy is being slow on the field or messing up plays, guys might ask, 'why you being so gay'? Or, they may say 'don't be so gay.' It's just an expression guys will say.

The hierarchy of masculinity appears to be reinforced with threats of labelling others as gay based on stereotypical notions of masculinity, which presuppose that some gay men do not possess hyper-masculine traits; a stereotype that appears unfounded (Pronger, 1990). Along similar lines to the statement of the university player, former professional player Esera Tuaolo (2006) writes: "The coaches would call us sissies when we didn't play well. Teammates called them faggots and queer bait" (p. 25). Further to this, describing locker room talk among professional players, Tuaolo (2006) writes: "Homophobia peppered the banter. They called each other fags, fucking queers, fudge packers- they took it to the crude and graphic limits" (p. 94). Stebbins (1987) indicates that similar homophobic sentiments are common in the Canadian Football League.

## **4. SENTIMENTS OF MASCULINE SUPERIORITY**

The use of perceived negative labels of subordinate masculinities and femininities appears to be employed by football players to separate out the men who can presumably excel in the sport. Those who fail to live up to these masculine expectations are criticized by other players and team coaches and can end up being cut from their teams. Football players also appear to construct a hierarchy of masculinity within those who have been accepted as masculine. A masculine power struggle occurs between men who exude sporting masculinity. Attempts to secure this masculine superiority or dominance are made both on and off the field.

### **4.1 Masculine Superiority on the Field**

Masculine superiority on the field appears dependant on three main factors: 1) the price a player is willing to pay for his team, 2) the pain he is willing to endure, 3) and the degree of hurt that he is able to inflict on his opponents. For football players to succeed and remain in their sport, they must engage in each of these acts. Those who are willing to play injured, make risky plays, and hit players on the opposing team with all-out effort on every play become valued members of the team who are admired by team mates, given extra playing time by coaches, heralded as warriors in the media, and worship by football fans.

## **4.2 Paying the Price**

Players ‘pay the price’ by engaging in acts that cause physical harm to their bodies for the benefit of their team and the increased likelihood of winning a game or championship. Describing this sentiment, Dave Meggyesy (1971) writes: “I’d have sacrificed my life for the team and I think the coaches knew it.” (p. 50). Likewise, Rocky Bleier (1975) writes:

I caught three passes for sixteen yards, but I paid for those. On a pass over the middle in the third quarter, Charles Phillips...speared me with his helmet in the kidney. After the game, I felt a rush of pain while standing at the urinal. I looked down and noticed I was passing pure blood. (p. 44)

In both examples, the former professional players have indicated a willingness to physically harm their bodies for the benefit of their team. Bleier (1975) “paid for” a few yards with a ruptured kidney.

According to former professional football player Steve Courson (1991), the use of steroids can also be seen as a way in which players are willing to pay the price for football glory. He writes: “Guys on steroids usually work twice as hard; they’re not looking for a quick fix. They’re among the most motivated athletes in the world, and they’re willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done- side effects or long-term damage be damned” (p. 18). From this perspective, using steroids are not a form of cheating but, rather, are seen as indicative of an athlete’s dedication to excelling at their sport regardless of the harm that it might be causing their bodies. Another former professional player, Robert Smith (2004), suggests that players do not avoid using illegal steroids because of the negative health consequences. Instead, most players avoid the use of steroids because of the negative perceptions of their use. He suggests that if players could use steroids without getting caught that the majority would, regardless of the possible health consequences. He writes: “Most players are willing to risk their health to perform.” (p. 123).

Some other football players suggest that dealing with long-term injuries, even after they are done playing the sport, is a price that they are or were willing to pay. Describing this, a junior coach reminiscing on his playing days commented:

I don’t regret anything and I would do it all over in a heart beat, but I have a steel plate, 4 pins and 2 screws in my left ankle, torn my MCL in my right knee, a stress fracture in my right femur, I’ve broke both ankles, all of my fingers, ribs, slipped a disk, separated my left shoulder, bruised my tailbone ridiculously bad and it still bothers me to this day and that was six years go, and I have badly dislocated my elbow... your body hates you after.

Despite all of these injuries, this coach indicated that it was all worth it as his long string of injuries were just the prices to pay to play the game of football.

## **4.3 Playing Through Pain**

Another measure of sporting masculinity on the field appears to be the degree of pain and injury that a player is willing to overcome to stay in the game. Expressing this sentiment, former professional player Jerome Bettis (2007) writes: “Pain is part of the game... if you can’t endure pain you can’t play [football]” (p. 117). He goes further to note the painful procedure he endured before every game for an entire season:

The needle was as long and as thick as a No.2 pencil... the doctor would stick that needle into the puffy part of my knee and extract all sorts of pus, blood, and little pieces of cartilage. Yeah, it hurt. Damn right it did. But if I wanted to play, that’s what I had to do. (p. 117)

Steve Courson (1991) makes similar remarks about playing through injury and enduring pain in his football career. He writes:

In nine years as a professional football player, I had played with a laundry list of injuries: dislocated foot, dislocated shoulder, hip pointers, pulled hamstrings, sprained ankles, sprained knees, torn knee cartilage. Like many offensive linemen, I also had undergone a couple of knee operations. For most injuries, I took the needle from the team physician, sucked it up, and went out to play.

In both of these examples the players indicate receiving some sort of painkiller to be able to endure the pain and continue to play. Players in this study were asked about their perceptions of painkillers. Several noted that taking painkillers was a sign of toughness. No player indicated that the use of painkillers was cheating or was not considered manly. In fact, the opposite was true where players who refused painkillers were perceived negatively by their teammates as being “soft” and as “liabilities on the team.”

The players and trainer interviewed in this study indicated that cortisone shots or injections, which are a form of steroid and effectively numb an injury, are not commonplace in Canadian football as they are in at higher levels of the American game. Instead, the reported painkiller of choice for Canadian football players is Tylenol III. One junior player reported to have known a teammate who obtained a type of horse tranquilizer to help mask the pain of an injury. No other participants in the study suggested that such extreme measures to kill pain and stay on the field are taken in Canadian football.

Some players simply play through pain and injury without the use of painkillers. Describing some experiences with playing through pain, a former CFL player stated:

I played six games with a separated left shoulder, five games on a stress fracture in my femur, and that is not because the trainers wanted me to. They couldn't figure out what it was, but they had an inkling that it was a stress fracture and sent me for a bone scan. I never went. When they didn't get the results back for a couple of weeks they pulled my equipment and said 'well, you are not doing anything until you go and get that done.' You push your body beyond its limits, and then you just have to keep going. You learn that you can really overcome anything, just because it is really taxing to go through an entire football season. Physically you are beat up all of the time, and you just have to adapt on a daily basis.

The concern for staying on the field is so high that some players, as was just described, will avoid seeking medical attention for fear that they might end up being relegated to the sidelines by a doctor. Describing this desire to not miss a single play because of injury, Bill Romanowski (2005) writes:

Up until that game, I never before experienced an injury that would remove me from a game. Each play meant so much to me that to miss even one was like a death sentence. It was something I could not accept. So this time, like so many more in my career, I went out and played the entire second half. (p. 59)

The concern Romanowski (2005) expresses is not of the long-term health implication of playing with an injury, or the pain that it will cause but, simply, that missing a single play is devastating enough that it can be equated to a "death sentence."

The vast majority of interviewed players reported that serious injuries are a part of the game of football and can end a career at any moment or place a player on the sideline for several months. Several players interviewed in this study indicated that in the event of an injury, players should try their best to not let the opposing team see their weakness. Clearly expressing this sentiment, former CFL quarterback Matt Dunigan (2007) writes: "Walk if you can, crawl if you have to, but get to the sidelines on your own. You're saying to the other team 'Is that all you've got? I'll be back and we'll kick your ass.'" Along similar lines, Robert Smith (2004) describes the actions of an injured teammate as follows:

Jeff Christy, our center, broke his leg with less than two minutes to go as we were trying to go in for a touchdown. Because we had no time-outs left, Jeff had to go off the field without the help of the trainers to avoid a penalty. All of our linemen were tough, but that was one of the most impressive displays I saw in all my playing days. (p. 133)

For Smith (2004), this act of getting off the field with a broken leg without any help was "tough" and "impressive"; such an act appears to be perceived by players as the pinnacle of sporting masculinity (p. 133).

Several players reported that the most difficult injuries to deal with in football are concussions. Many players appear concerned by the long-term health consequences of injuries to their brains. One university player reported experiencing difficulties concentrating in class, which began after he sustained a concussion playing football. Another reason reported by a few players for why concussions are such a difficult injury to have is because the signs of injury are not immediately visible. Players who receive a concussion often appear dazed, but their bodies remain in tact and it is not apparent that a serious injury has occurred. As such, a few players reported to have played through concussions over concern that they would appear to be faking an injury. According to several players interviewed in this study, concussions are not a masculine injury; there is no blood, wounds, scars, or broken bones as markers of manliness.

#### **4.4 Inflicting Pain on Opponents**

Beyond playing with pain, an indicator of masculinity on the field appears to be the degree of pain that a player is able to consistently inflict on his opponents. Describing this sentiment, a university linebacker remarked:

As a defender, I do everything in my power to stop whoever has the ball. The goal is to make the play. The goal is to hurt the person. However, the goal is not to injure him... I want them to fear me, to remember my hits, to try and avoid me, to think about me.

Another university linebacker reported: "I love seeing big hits, dishing out big hits, and even getting crushed myself." Along similar lines, a university lineman stated: "You want to punish a guy and make him remember you."

According to former professional player Tim Green (1996), masculine superiority on field can be measured by the amount of blood a player has on his uniform at the end of the game. He writes:

Blood is a beloved thing [in football]. If a player can draw blood from another, it's like winning the big stuffed bear for your girlfriend at the fair. It means that you have hit someone so hard that they burst. If a coach sees blood all over his players at the end of a game or practice, he knows that some serious hitting has been going on and it warms his soul. (p. 188)

For Green (1996), inflicting pain on opponents and causing them to bleed appears as a marker of masculinity for players much like the masculine feat of “winning the big stuffed bear for your girlfriend at the fair” (p. 188). Jerome Bettis (2007) suggests that another marker of manliness on the field is the amount of paint players have on their helmets in opposing team colours following the game. This paint indicates that a player has been hitting the other team hard and is not afraid to lead with his head.

#### **4.5 Masculine Superiority off the Field**

Masculine superiority in football is not only determined on the field, but also appears to be a constant struggle off of the field. Football players must portray an identity that reflects the tough, dominant identity that they have worked hard to attain on the gridiron. According to a few players, football fuels a competitive drive that turns all aspects of life into a competition. Tasks as simple as driving to practice become a race; eating hamburgers becomes a competition for who can eat the most. Sporting masculinity does not appear limited to the confines of the field. Two main aspects of sporting masculinity off of the field described by players include the development of “studitis” and a deep concern for body image (Shaw, 1972, p. 140).

#### **4.6 Studitis**

Former university football player Gary Shaw (1972) describes his conception of “studitis” as a condition where football players come to, “think of themselves as real ‘studs’... superior- real men,” and that, “those studs had to grab anything that would hold up this male superiority- championships, trophies, newspaper clippings, girls” (p. 140-141). Commenting on this need for a football player to have the attention of women to be deemed appropriately masculine, Esera Tualo (2006) writes: “A football player is supposed to have a cheerleader at his side” (p. 54). Describing his sexual prowess with women, former professional player Lawrence Taylor (2003) writes: “There must be Viagra in my bloodstream or something. During this period of time, I had 1-800-Call-a-Bitch on my speed dial” (p. 277). Concerned that he might not live up to the masculine standards of the football player off of the field with women, Dave Kopay (1977) writes: “There was always the fear that I wouldn’t be able to live up to the image of the football stud in bed” (p.113).

Identities based on ideals of sporting masculinity appear rooted in competition and dominance. Off of the field, everyday tasks can become a competition to prove one’s manhood. Some competitions like eating the most hamburgers might be relatively harmless; other competitions might not, such as drinking games or attempts to have sexual intercourse with more women than other players on the team. Sporting masculinity becomes rooted in stereotypical notions of the football stud. Football player Joe Namath was made famous by his arrogant antics and multiple sexual partners off of the field. Exemplifying his studitis, Namath (1969) titled his autobiography “I can’t wait until tomorrow... ‘cause I get better looking everyday,” and one of his chapter is titled “I am the greatest” (p. 156).

#### **4.7 Body Image**

The vast majority of players interviewed in this study, across all playing levels, expressed some concern for body image and size. Many players and coaches referred to the larger-sized linemen as “fats” and “fatties.” When asked about using supplements, the majority of players indicated that they did so to gain size, while being able to keep their body fat percentage low. Players appear to strive to be as big as they can without receiving the negative grouping with the so-called “fats.” Describing his body weight concerns, a 300-pound offensive lineman in the CFL remarked: “Usually the biggest issue for me is that I am always small at my position so it has always been a battle to gain weight.” Along similar lines, former professional player Tim Green (1996) writes:

I played my entire eight years in the league trying to gain weight. I struggled on a weekly basis hoping to tilt the scales at two hundred and fifty. Steroids were always an option. I passed. Lots of guys use weight gaining dietary supplements, powders that you could mix into milkshakes that would blast thousands of calories into your system in just one glassful. I simply ate everything that could fit on a plate, and then went back for more. (p. 38)

Several interviewed players indicated that their desire to gain lean muscle mass was more a result of wanting to appear intimidating on and off the field, more so than the sport-specific benefits of the increased weight. On university defensive lineman noted: “When you are bigger than your opponent, it just gives you that mental edge over him. He fears you and you know it.”

In contrast to this statement, Shaw (1972) suggests that it is the smaller guys on the field who need to be feared, because they must make up for their stature. Describing this, while revealing a real concern over body image by players, Shaw (1972) writes:

The most interesting thing about these workouts was how body-conscious and weight-conscious everyone was. We were all in shorts and T-shirts, and I found myself constantly checking out other bodies and noticing other players doing the same. I concentrated on legs and forearms... Guys with extraordinary legs usually got

the most comments: 'Look at that son-of-a-bitch's legs,' followed by a nervous laugh. The size of the calf seemed directly proportional to power. Strangely, though, the guys who were smaller than most also aroused fear, a kind of uneasy apprehension that they must really be mean to be that small and still have been awarded a scholarship. (p. 43)

Shaw (1972) reveals that some of the body image concerns of football players are over the physical characteristics of others, including a player's teammates. Those with different physical features are thought to possess different masculine characteristics, with the size of the calf muscle being "directly proportional to power" (p. 43).

Each of these aspects appear to be related to the amount of sporting masculinity, or "gender capital", that a given football player can possess (Mullins, 2006, p. 18). Within the hierarchy of sporting masculinities, those at the top are the players who: play with pain, sacrifice themselves for their team, inflict pain on their opponents, have the most conventionally attractive girlfriends or have had sexual intercourse with the most women, and have the most muscle mass while maintaining low body fat percentages. Without one or more of these features, a player might still be able to play the game of football without the constant ridicule of their coaches and teammates for being "soft", "weak", and other stereotypical feminine traits. Without some of these features, however, players might not be able to achieve the admiration of their coaches, teammates, the media, and spectators who appear to relish sporting masculinity.

## **5. ANALOGIES OF WAR**

A common theme of sporting masculinity in football appears to be making analogies of war. For some this includes full analogies where the game of football is akin to all-out warfare, while to others this involves equating football to aspects of war. Describing football as though it is actual war, former professional football player Reggie White (1996) writes:

In football, as in warfare, the battle is often won and lost in the trenches. The trenches are where the offensive and defensive linemen face each other across the line of scrimmage. The trenches are the first line of defense. When the ball is snapped, you instantly hear the grinding, thudding, clattering, clashing sound of bodies, pads, and helmets. That's the sound of battle at the front lines of the game. In seconds, the quarterback and his receivers may launch an aerial attack, or the running backs may carry the ball over the line and into enemy territory, but the battle always begins in the trenches. My job as a defensive lineman is to break through enemy lines, to invade enemy territory, to sack the enemy quarterback for a loss, to stop the enemy backs, to thwart the enemy air attacks, to stop the enemy's drive and move the line of scrimmage back into his territory. (p. 27)

For White (1996), each of the specific aspects of football can be equated to actual combat. Other players express similar sentiments, although in much less detail. For instance, Dave Kopay (1977) writes: "Compared to other sports, football is like real combat" (p. 99).

Several players make specific analogies of football as war. Robert Smith (2004) describes the tackles of opponents as bullets. He writes: "They were shooting real bullets now and defenders came at you with an insatiable desire to knock something loose from you- either the ball or your head" (p. 90). Long similar lines, Dave Kopay (1977) describes injured teammates as wounded soldiers. He writes:

An injured player is worse than a wounded soldier in combat. The player- unless a shot of novocaine can get him back in play- might as well be dead. Even in college we were taught not to look back if one of our teammates went down. (p. 115)

Kopay (1977) uses the analogy of "not looking back" despite the confined space of the football field, where there's no real continuous forward progression beyond a few yards at a time. Terrell Owens (2004) suggests that football is: "a lot like the military, where everyone is supposed to fall in line and be like everyone else" (P.5).

Numerous players also equate aspects of football with weaponry of war. Meggyesy (1971) describes using his "body as a weapon" on the field of play (p. 157). Jerry Kramer (1968) describes his helmet as a weapon. He writes:

It's a good weapon, probably the best weapon I've got. When I get mad at somebody- maybe the defensive tackle's been clubbing me with his forearm- I use my helmet on him. I hit him with the helmet high on his chest, then slide up to his chin. (p. 80)

Steve Courson (1991) suggests that steroids can serve as a secret weapon for football players. Bill Romanowski (2005) indicates that he uses a number of metaphoric weapons on the football field. He writes: "I felt I had to play at a higher level of intensity, to use my rage like a weapon," and later, "a player needs all the weapons he can get. Speed, strength, smarts, relentlessness" (p. 72).

Canadian sport sociologist Greg Malszecki (1995) suggests that masculinity in sport has a long tradition of being related to combat and warfare for the purpose of reinforcing masculine supremacy. Describing the some reasons for the prevalence of analogies of war made in sport Malszecki (1995) writes:

Such man-talk evokes the idealized past of male conquests through legendary exploits of heroes; it reinforces coercive consent among the hierarchies of masculinities; it seduces young boys into the phallogocentric cult of virility; and, it effectively excludes while simultaneously silences women as the ‘weaker sex’” (p. iv).

Sport, like war, can be seen to reinforce traditional masculine characteristics and ideologies of male power, dominance, and superiority.

By reinforcing metaphors of ‘war as sport’ and ‘sport as war’, traditional gender scripts are maintained serving to glorify men while suppressing women. Metaphors of war and sport can be perceived as metaphors of male supremacy. The men who fight in wars and those who compete on the gridiron are not, however, the men who benefit most by reinforcing and glorifying masculinity. Men who fight in wars must risk being killed in wars. Football players risk catastrophic injuries each time the ball is snapped. It is the hegemonic man, in the business suit, who profits from the work of athletes and soldiers to uphold myths of masculine superiority, not necessarily the athletes and soldiers themselves.

## **6. A TOTAL INSTITUTION**

A further characteristic shared by both war and sport is that they can both be seen as “male domains” or “male spaces” that largely exclude women. Women are involved in both war and sport, but in limited capacities and are typically separated from men. Men in sport, such as football, can be said to exist in what Erving Goffman (1961) terms a “total institution,” (p.1). Describing his conception of total institutions, Goffman (1961) writes:

When we review the different institutions in our Western society, we find some that are encompassing to a degree discontinuously greater than the ones next in line. Their encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside... These establishments I am calling total institutions. (p.4)

According to Goffman (1961), the main characteristics of total institutions include: it strips the individual of their “home-world” identity (p. 12), encompasses their whole being, does not allow for individuality, follows a regimented pattern of life, develops a punishment and privileging system to shape behaviour, isolates individuals from the outside world, and is inescapable. These are some of the main characteristics, of the many, that Goffman (1961) describes; each can be found in Canadian football. The institution of Canadian football can be perceived, in many ways, as a male total institution in that it excludes women and continues to perpetuate myths and behaviours of male dominance and superiority.

Summarizing the total institution of football, former professional player Jerry Kramer (1968) comments:

I went to jail today. I started an eight-week sentence... The whole thing is a pain in the ass. The worst part is you are completely a captive of the coach and football. It’s not like you put in two hours in the morning, two in the afternoon, and two in the evening. You’re required to attend breakfast at 7 a.m., ride in the bus over to the stadium, ride back in the bus, eat lunch, go over to the stadium and back again, dinner, meeting, curfew. If you’re lucky, you get an hour and a half or two hours a day to do whatever you want. (p.27)

The vast majority of players interviewed in this study noted similar drawbacks of playing football that they “didn’t have time for anything else” or that “all of their time went to football.” A former university player described the time-commitment involved in the weeks before the football season began as follows:

The way the head coach used to run it is every third day was a three a day practice. So every day was two practices a day and then every third day you have three separate practices a day. So you would be in meetings at 8am, on the field at 9 to 11, meetings from 11 to 12, get a longer break for lunch from 12 to 2, taping stuff from 2 till 3, meetings from 3 till 4, practice from 4 till 6, dinner and meetings so that you get home at 8 or 9, and then you do it all over again. And we used to hit... we used to just kick the crap out of each other. It was a war of attrition at times. If you could get past Wednesday, we called that hump day, so if we could get past Wednesday you were ok because everything just hurt so bad that it kind of blended into one big hurt. Every year that I did it I looked back and wondered how I did it the year before.

University football players are return to school a month earlier than their classmates to be out on the field or doing other football related tasks, such as learning plays and watching game tapes. During this time, days are spent among men, with very little contact with individuals outside of football.

While in the total institution of football, players can be stripped of their identity and individuality. Describing this process, Terrell Owens (2004) writes: “They want to take away our individuality and personalities and make us all the same. It’s stifling. Just let us play!” (p. 77). Similarly, Steve Courson (1991) suggests that football players are required to

obey orders, rather than think on their own. He writes: "It's a major no-no for any player to think too much on his own. They prefer the player to be a violent monster on the field, but a docile dog/child/robot (pick one) off it" (p. 102). Gary Shaw (1972) suggests that players can have interests, but that they must be conducive to winning in football. He writes: "Football... inhibits interests in anything not winner-oriented and places a strict taboo on most feelings" (p. 189).

Players who do not comply with the expectations of their coaches to exhibit the desired behaviours of football players receive punishment such as running laps in practice, or can be cut from the team. The players who were interviewed in this study were asked the question: "Is it ever difficult to play at full-speed and make hard tackles each day out on the field?" The vast majority of players responded that this was not a problem for them. Several, however, indicated that this was a difficult aspect of playing football; however, as indicated by one professional player, "if I take a day off I might as well start looking for a new job." Likewise, Dave Kopay (1977) writes: "Unlike baseball, professional football has no minor leagues. If you don't go out and prove you can do it every game, you can easily be off the team by the next game" (p. 100). Those who buy into the values of the masculine institution are rewarded with praise from their coaches, additional playing time, and bigger contracts. Those who do not may receive limited playing time and/or can be cut from their teams. There is a definite system of rewards and punishments in the total institution of football for adopting the traits and behaviours expected of players, without revealing thoughts and characteristics that conflict with what is valued and expected.

Unlike many total institutions like prison and military service, players can simply walk away from their sport. However, this comes at the cost of losing their job salary or losing their university scholarships. Players also suggest that they no longer know how to exist outside of football because it has been so integral to the identity they have formed of themselves as well as the camaraderie they have developed with their teammates. Describing the process of leaving football after retiring as a professional player, Dave Meggyesy (1971) writes:

I had to learn what it was to be an individual. This won't seem very momentous to people who have grown up outside the world of athletics. But for a jock, becoming somebody real, getting involved in a life off the playing field, is a significant problem.

While players are free to leave the sport of football, this appears to be a difficult, and potentially costly, decision.

## **7. CONSEQUENCES OF SPORTING MASCULINITY**

The difficulties related to identity formation of football players as Meggyesy (1971) describes, is one of several consequences of the development and glorification of sporting masculinity in Canadian football. Three of the consequences will be briefly examined in this section including: 1) damaged bodies, 2) damaged selves, and 3) reinforcing damaging myths of masculinity.

### **7.1 Damaged Bodies**

Every player interviewed in this study, at each playing level, reported having experienced an injury that required some sort of medical attention. For the majority of players, the injuries they reported were minor such as ankle and shoulder sprains, jammed toes and fingers, and slight muscle strains and tears. The vast majority of players indicated that they experience some form of injury during every game, even if just a bruised knee or ankle. However, over the course of a season, these little injuries can come to make playing the game increasingly difficult. Several players noted that a major aspect of playing football is "adapting to injuries." For instance, one junior wide receiver noted that he had lost some speed because of a sprained ankle, which required him to be more efficient in running his routes to get open, instead of being able to rely on his athleticism. Several players noted that injuries can help improve some aspects of their playing ability, as they are forced to develop new skills when adapting to injuries. When the injury heals, the new skill remains.

Not all players are fortunate enough to experience minor injuries that can be perceived in such a positive light. For instance, as quoted previously, a junior coach reported a long string of injuries from his playing career, which included a broken ankle, torn MCL knee ligament, broken leg, broken fingers, back problems, broken ribs, a bruised tail bone, and a dislocated elbow. These injuries were all sustained by a single player. Other players have reported similar injury lists compiled over their playing careers. Jerry Kramer (1968) writes: "During my life, I've submitted, not always cheerfully, to a total of twenty-two operations... I've got stitching from the top of my head to my ankles; for all of my stitches, my teammates call me 'Zipper'" (p. xvii). Similarly, Dave Meggyesy (1971) writes:

During my four years I accumulated a broken wrist, separations of both shoulders, an ankle that was torn up so badly it broke the arch of my foot, three major brain concussions and an arm that almost had to be amputated... And I was one of the lucky ones. (p. 72)

Meggyesy (1971) writes further:

One of the justifications for college football is that it is not only a character-builder, but a body-builder as well. This is nonsense... Young men are having their bodies destroyed, not developed. As a matter of fact, few players can escape from college football without some form of permanent disability. (p. 72)

A university linebacker interviewed in this study suggested that he was one of the players who were not able to escape playing football without dealing with the permanent discomfort and disability. Describing this, he remarked:

Constant, regular, physical pain. Difficulty bending down, picking up things, putting on your socks in the morning. Sometimes, with concussions, you'll lose sleep, and won't be able to concentrate in class. Other injuries require extensive rehabilitation, which is difficult, frustrating and time-consuming. There are also obvious financial costs associated to injuries. They are mostly covered, but for private care, players will sometimes have to pay hefty sums.

Another university offensive lineman described his football injuries as follows: "I've torn my shoulder, popped it out a bunch of times, got concussions, that's about it." To most people, these types of injuries would likely be deemed quite serious. For many football players, it appears that only having experienced injuries of this magnitude in their sport makes them fortunate or, as Dave Meggyesy (1971) wrote, "one of the lucky ones" (p. 72).

Football injuries do not just damage bodies in ways that can lead to long term discomfort and disability, but that can have life-threatening health repercussions. For instance, in 2008 a high school football player in the United States died in a practice from "septic shock, multiple organ failure and complications from heat stroke" (Schreiner, 2009, p. 1). Charley Taylor (in Shaw, 1972) describes an injury on the football field that almost took his life as follows:

In Spring training my sophomore year, I broke my neck- four vertebrae. 'Hey Coach,' I said, 'my neck don't feel good.' 'There's nothing wrong with your neck, you jackass,' he said. So the numb went away a little, and I made a tackle. When I went to get up, my body got up but my head just stayed there, right on the ground. The coach says, 'Hey, get this jackass off the field.' So the trainer put some ice on my neck and after practice they took me up to the infirmary for an X-ray. The doctor said, 'Son, your neck is broken. You got here ten minutes later, you'd be dead.' Dead! Man, that scared me. (p. 151)

Other football related ailments may not develop until after a player has retired from the sport. For example, Steve Courson (1991) required a heart transplant at only thirty-three years old after having used steroids throughout his football career. While medical professionals made no direct links from the steroids to the heart problem, the doctors were sure that the condition was made far worse by the strain placed on his heart with weight increases of twenty-eight pounds in a single month to the point where he was nearly three-hundred pounds with a low body fat percentage. His heart could not keep up with this growth caused by what Courson termed "vocation drug use" to "become more productive" at his job of playing professional football.

Like their bodies, the brains of football players are often damaged during their careers from violent tackles resulting in long-term consequences to their health and well-being. Former CFL quarterback Matt Dunigan, now TV analyst, has recently started to speak out against the dangers of concussions to football players in Canada. Describing his experience of concussions as a football player, Dunigan (2007) writes:

The official count on my concussions is 12, but there were probably double or triple that many. You get hit, your head snapped back or bounced off the turf, you went to the sidelines and then came back. In football, it was the cost of doing business. (p. 289)

This quote relates to a previous discussion in this paper on "paying the price", which can be perceived as an indicator of sporting masculinity in football. According to Dunigan (2007), concussions are the "cost of doing business" in football (p. 289). Matt Dunigan has, and continues to pay, considerable costs for the damage to his brain that he sustained as a football player. Many of the issues he, and other players who have experienced concussions such as the university player quoted in the previous section, have reportedly dealt with arising from concussions include: confusion, severe headaches, memory loss, erratic behaviour, mood swings, depression, and dizziness (Dunigan, 2007).

## **7.2 Damaged Selves**

As just discussed, injuries on the field, such as concussions, can have detrimental psychological effects on players, such as issues of depression and mood swings. Further revealing the detrimental physiological effects of football injuries, a university linebacker remarked that: "Injuries affect you psychologically as an athlete. They become an omnipresent burden in your life, which can cause depression and anger. There is nothing worse than being trapped inside your own body."

The damaging psychological effects of injuries on players are not always a direct result of the injury and the pain they are experiencing. The vast majority of players interviewed in this study indicated that the worst part of being injured was the feeling as though they no longer belonged to the team or were accepted by coaches and teammates. One university

quarterback who was forced to sit out an entire season due to injured stated: “the pain of not playing and not feeling like part of the team was far worse than the pain in my shoulder that was keeping me out.” Players have their masculine identity and most of their social networks wrapped up in football. When injured, players are typically isolated by their coaches and teammates. To reiterate a quote from a previous section, “An injured player is worse than a wounded soldier in combat... we were taught not to look back if one of our teammates went down” (Kopay, 1977, p. 115). Describing the experience of being injured, Gary Shaw (1972) writes:

The coaches had no interest in me as a person. After they found out that I would miss at least several weeks of the season and would most likely be through with football, I didn't hear from them again. During those weeks there were no questions, no inquiries into my condition. Once my name had been removed from the chart, I ceased to exist. (p. 119)

In professional Canadian football, players are perceived as investments. Once injured, they can be cut at their team training camp the following season. Little care or attention is given to those who have incurred serious, potentially career-ending, injuries. Former a new identity away from football then becomes difficult for players. Describing this, Dave Meggyesy (1971) writes: “I had to learn what it was to be an individual.... For a jock, becoming somebody real, getting involved in a life off the playing field, is a significant problem” (p. 164). Describing the isolation of leaving football, Walter Payton (2000) writes: “Once you get out of the game, the truth is you lose a lot of relationships” (p. 116).

The isolation from dealing with injuries, as well as developing an identity after retiring from the total institution of football, appear to lead to further psychological issues for players that can result in drug and alcohol abuse. Football players become accustomed to taking drugs when they are injured to momentarily kill the pain they are experiencing in their bodies. When their pain is psychological, some might resort to similar methods. Describing the aftermath of playing professional football Simeon Rice (2004) writes: “When a football career ends, what do you have? The answer to that question depends who you ask. Money? Fame? Family? Religion? Chronic pain? Depression? Rage issues? None of the above? All of the above?” (p. 253). In their autobiographies, former professional players Steve Courson (1991), Lawrence Taylor (2003), Roy Simmons (2006), and Esera Tuaolo (2006) all report to have struggled with drug and/or alcohol problems as a result of playing football.

The masculine identity developed within the confines of football can have larger criminological repercussions in the larger community. The acts of violence and aggression on the field that can make a football player a celebrated commodity, can be crimes of assault and battery off of the field. Notions of male dominance and superiority can lead to rape, domestic violence, and other crimes of male power. These crimes can be labelled as crimes of male power, as they are rooted in efforts of men to attain and reinforce positions of power over women (Brownmiller, 1976).

Benedict and Yaeger (1998) reveal that in a study of 509 National Football League players, 109 had been arrested one or more times for serious crimes, for a total of 264 arrests. The crimes considered by Benedict and Yaeger (1998) included: homicide, rape, kidnapping, robbery, assault, battery, domestic violence, reckless endangerment, fraud, larceny, burglary, theft, property destruction, drug-related offenses, illegal use or possession of a weapon, DUI, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest. In a separate study, Benedict (1997) found that between 1986 and 1996 over 425 professional and college athletes were publicly reported to have committed violent crime of physical assault and/or rape against women. These numbers peaked in 1995 and 1996, with 199 male athletes charged with physical or sexual assaults on women. As such, Benedict (2004) describes the masculine consequences of sporting masculinity as creating a “culture of rape, violence, and crime”, which disproportionately effects women who are victimized by male athletes (p. i).

Describing the inability to shut off the ideals of sporting masculinity, former professional football player Tim Green (1996) writes:

There are, though, some who cannot separate the violence of the game from real life. They have tapped into the dark side and have no shutoff valve... They mistake life for an extension of the playing field where you hit hard and you hit first, where bashing someone unconscious is a badge of honor and breaking bones is a treat” (p. 73).

The ideals of sporting masculinity, such as dominance, superiority, aggression, and violence, can be intimately linked to the perpetration of crimes, particularly towards women, away from the field. Some players who have conformed to the model of sporting masculinity in football appear to become dangerous in the larger community. No players interviewed in this study reported to have been charged with any serious crimes on or away from the football field. At least one interviewed player had, however, faced criminal charges for assaulting a woman, which was publicized in the media; although, he did not report this in the interview.

### **7.3 Reinforcing Damaging Myths of Masculinity**

Perhaps the most significant consequence of sporting masculinity in Canadian football is the reinforcement of damaging myths of male superiority, dominance, aggression, and power. These stereotypical characteristics of men serve to create tolerance for a range of damaging actions perpetrated by men. Domestic violence perpetrated against women is tolerable

because men are perceived as belonging to the aggressive gender (Bograd, 1988). Rape is often overlooked and under-policed because men are perceived as belonging to the dominant gender (Hall et. al., 1986). Some men are able to create working conditions that provide no job security, health care, benefits, child care, or maternity leave because men are perceived as belonging to the superior gender (Vosko, 2001). Some men are able to hold positions as managers, directors, and CEOs, while most women cannot, because men are perceived as belonging to the powerful gender (Loden, 1977).

The men who play football are not examples or direct beneficiaries of hegemonic masculinity. Football players are not at the top of the hierarchy of masculinities. Many of the masculine rules, roles, and behaviours expected of football players reflect those of more dominant masculinities; however, football players in Canada are susceptible to marginalization and oppression in their place of work with little to no health benefits, a uniquely competitive work environment, no job security, and the requirement to constantly engage in physically dangerous work (Fogel, 2009). While not a form of hegemonic masculinity, sporting masculinity contributes to myths of male power, dominance, and superiority. Football, more than any other sport, can be seen as the glorification of men and masculinity. Men on the football field are unique physical specimens, often as a result of illicit steroid use, where 285-pound men can be all-muscle and run 40 yards in under five seconds. This is among the few remaining examples of where men really are superior to women.

Women are excluded from playing football with men because their bodies are typically not able to be developed to such an extent. All-women football leagues do exist; however, the product is not the same because most female football players do not have the combined size, strength, and speed of their male counterparts. Few women appear to have the genetic potential to be 285-pounds of primarily lean muscle mass. This gender disparity is becoming increasingly minimal in most sports. For instance, many female basketball players are now developing the explosive speed and strength to play above the rim and dunk a basketball, and female basketball players typically shoot the ball as well if not better than most men. Women's basketball is fast, exciting and gaining real popularity throughout North America, as is women's soccer, tennis, beach volleyball, and hockey. Football remains as one of the last male spaces in the sports coliseum. As such, the popularity of football rests largely on the glorification of male superiority. Groups of men gather to watch the Super Bowl or the Grey Cup not merely to enjoy the sport of football, but to be reminded of their superiority as men. Studies have found that rates of domestic abuse rise dramatically on Super Bowl Sunday, which can be attributed, at least in part, to the reinforcement of this myth of male superiority via the sport of football (Chu, 2000; Cobb, 1993).

The myths of male superiority and dominance developed and reinforced on the field of play serve the interests of all men. The stereotypical notions are developed and maintained that men are strong, dominant, and necessary as the potential protectors of women and children. In reality, the vast majority of men have little physical resemblance to football players. Yet, regardless of their size and demeanour, because they are men they benefit from the myths of masculinity reinforced on the football field. These myths can ultimately have damaging effects for both men and women. For most men, the conformity to rules of masculinity can lead to crime, dangerous risk-taking behaviour, and the development of little emotional awareness and intelligence (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Courtaney, 2000; Vick, 2003). For some women, the conformity to rules of masculinity by men can result in blocked social mobility, precarious working conditions, and victimization from crimes of male power, such as sexual assault and domestic violence (Brownmiller, 1976; Vosko, 2001). As Pronger (1990) suggests, rape can be seen as the result of over-conformity to the rules of masculinity. As such, sporting masculinity not only appears to result in male football players committing a disproportionate amount of physical and sexual violence against women, but it also may contribute to male perpetrated domestic violence and rape more generally.

## **8. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

As this paper has explored, the popularity of football rests largely on the glorification of myths of male superiority. The excitement that exists around football and its cultural expressions can be seen as a celebration of masculine ideals of power, dominance, and superiority. Football is a space that not only polices femininity, but celebrates hetero-normative masculinity. Given the predominance of football within Canadian culture, greater academic attention needs to be given to the power it holds in shaping masculine ideals.

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