

PLAYING BY THE RULES – OFF THE FIELD

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The occasion was one of the highlights of the Rugby League season. Practically every VIP associated with the code was there. I'd just begun coordinating a large research project into player attitudes and behaviours to women and into the role and status of women in League generally. A man in an expensive suit approached me and without even introducing himself launched into what would become a very familiar speech: 'If you think you can change these guys you are totally naïve. They're animals – the lot of them. That's what they're paid for. You just can't trust them around women.' When the monologue ended, he explained that he was a barrister, he'd seen me on television talking about the research project and it was clear to him that I was a feminist academic pawn in a vast public relations exercise.

I didn't get the chance to say that I had no plan to change anyone given that I had, as yet, no hard evidence of what needed changing. At that stage, all anyone was trading in was gossip and media speculation. But he'd already launched into his solution to the problem as he saw it. It was obvious to him that lots of League players were assaulting and harassing women. The National Rugby League's CEO, David Gallop, needed to go out and make an example of as many players as he could. The rest would get the message. Punishment, banishment and a good smack in the face, my new mentor assured me, were the only things the kind of men who play League understand. Or as another male colleague in the media put it to me: 'These guys are as dumb as a box of hammers. That's why they're playing League.'

As someone who grew up in the industrial and largely working-class town of Newcastle but who went on to do an Arts/Law degree at Sydney University, I've always known there was a class divide between the people who play and follow League and Union. I was equally aware, having dated blokes in both camps, that social class has nothing to do with male attitudes or behaviours towards women. While I stood there being patronised by my barrister buddy an image sprung into my mind of an uncomfortable morning I once spent in a criminal law lecture. We'd just started on the sexual assault cases and a bunch of guys decided it

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would be hilarious to bring in a plastic blow-up sex doll and pass it around the room. I have a hazy memory of our lecturer holding it. I clearly remember one of the women in the class leaving the room in tears.

As anybody associated with the fields of sexual assault and harassment prevention, counselling, education or law knows, they are areas fraught with stereotypes and myths. Blaming the (usually female) victim is still astoundingly common in public and private discussions of assault and of other sexualised mistreatment of women. What receives less attention, and yet is arguably just as important to focusing community attention on the extent of sexual assault and harassment, is the persistent denial that these behaviours cross all classes and professional groups. The idea that we already know in advance what kind of men perpetrate sexual assault or harassment is a dangerous and very false comfort, as Karen Willis, the Director of NSW Rape Crisis and a key adviser to the research project, has often noted publicly.

It is true, of course, that community concern about the way League players were treating women didn't come out of thin air. The decision to commission research came at a time when a number of players were being investigated for an alleged group sexual assault of a woman and when other allegations of assault and harassment of women had surfaced in media interviews. As it happens, none of the allegations being investigated by police or circulated in the media in early 2004 were tested in court. And while it would be totally inappropriate to speculate on any of those allegations here, there's no question that the level of community concern matched the seriousness of the allegations.

To its credit, the National Rugby League decided that, rather than waiting to see what transpired in criminal justice terms, more needed to be known about player attitudes and behaviours to women and the role and status of women across the game. My approach, as coordinator of the research project they commissioned, was to bring a multidisciplinary team together who combined practical experience in sexual assault, sex discrimination and harassment, as well as a theoretical knowledge of the fields. A management consultant specialising in sex discrimination, Wendy McCarthy, joined the project to oversee the research into the broader role of women at board, executive and management levels across the game. With her extensive background in sexual assault prevention and counselling, Karen Willis came on board to advise on protocols for supporting individuals who allege sexual assault against League representatives. She also had critical input into the research methodology and the recommendations contained in the final report. Kath Albury, an expert in sexual ethics and education, had a key role in designing education and mentoring initiatives in response to our findings. Michael Flood, an expert in male violence prevention, also contributed a great deal to the framing of the research and the recommendations.

The research project is the largest of its kind to date internationally. We reviewed 170 extensive questionnaires from current first grade players and we conducted more than 200 in-depth interviews with current players, CEOs, coaches, trainers and women who work in League. In addition, we conducted a comprehensive international literature review focused on finding out what other

studies of professional athletes show about attitudes and behaviours to women, what had been done to change problematic behaviours in terms of education, mentoring and codes of conduct and, most importantly, what is working.

What we found was that many of the player attitudes and behaviours towards women are not markedly out of step with groups of other young men who have been the subject of related research. Certainly, players were unanimous in denouncing sexual assault and many were clearly horrified that some in the community thought they condoned rape. At the same time, many players were openly asking for more support in managing sexual and social encounters with women in ways that always ensured informed consent and which didn't result in any party feeling damaged or demeaned.

The latter finding is one it's easy to scoff at. Why should any man need education in making sure a woman has consented to any kind of interaction? Isn't it all a matter of common sense and decency? Certainly, that's what the majority of media commentators I've dealt with seem to think. In fact, a great deal of research into the sexual and social behaviour of young people suggests that a lot of sexual encounters are arranged using non-verbal cues and that there is a real communication problem around sex and consent. A key issue identified in our research is the ongoing double standard according to which women are regarded as 'sluts' if they are sexually active or assertive. It's an attitude which not only leads to women potentially being 'punished' for having sex and treated with contempt, it's one which can lead women to rely on non-verbal cues as well, so they can avoid having to actually say 'yes'.

Sexual assault prevention obviously needs to be based on a multi-pronged approach. On one hand, we need to be driving the message home that assault is still widespread and that the damage done to the victims and those close to them is often life-long. On the other, we need to focus on implementing education and mentoring programs which don't alienate young men by making them feel that they have already been labelled as potential rapists. In relation to the latter, our research suggests that there's a real need to intensify sex education programs aimed at getting teenage boys and girls to think through the ethics of sexual encounters – to learn how to handle saying 'yes' as well as saying 'no'.

But when it comes to the role education and mentoring can play in changing attitudes and behaviours, it's clear that there is still an enormous amount of scepticism. The same people who think the kind of men who play violent body contact sport are more likely to be rapists are equally certain that there's nothing you can do to change blokes like that. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy really. Some men are born, or socially programmed, to fail the civilisation test. As my barrister mate put it, 'they're animals'; they are totally identified with their bodies. Which gives them, when you think about it, a lot in common with women.

If you take the view that the majority of sexual assault, harassment and generally unethical sexual treatment of women is largely the product of bad individuals behaving in predictably bad ways, then the only rational solution is to identify these individuals and groups and get them out of our collective face. In some cases, of course, that's precisely what we need to do. But if we are talking about male attitudes, behaviours and bonding rituals which, as our research

shows, manifest themselves in many public and private institutions and cultures, then the solution looks a little less palatable to those who enjoy the view from the highest moral ground.