



# Machismo, Misogyny, and Homophobia in a Male Athletic Subculture: a Participant-Observation Study of Deviant Rituals in Collegiate Rugby

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## Abstract

Sociological literature focusing on athletic subcultures is abundant; however, little exists that specifically addresses the deviant conduct inherent within these enclaves. Save a few select studies, this is especially true of male collegiate rugby in the United States. Collegiate rugby in the United States is considered by many to be an emerging sport; as such, little is known about the deviant conduct, both criminal and non-criminal, that is inherent within the subculture. Utilizing participant and non-participant observation over the course of several years, this study explores the ritualistic deviant conduct within the male collegiate rugby subculture. The behavior is framed in terms of a functional group phenomenon that appears to be largely perpetuated by the notions of homophobia, machismo, and misogyny. Variations of social learning theories are discussed as possible frameworks by which to examine this unique behavior in future analyses.

# Machismo, Misogyny, and Homophobia in a male Athletic Subculture: a Participant-Observation Study of Deviant Rituals in Collegiate Rugby

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Sociological literature focusing on athletic subcultures is abundant; however, little exists that specifically addresses the deviant conduct inherent within these enclaves. Save a few select studies, this is especially true of male collegiate rugby in the United States. Collegiate rugby in the United States is considered by many to be an emerging sport; as such, little is known about the deviant conduct, both criminal and non-criminal, that is inherent within the subculture. Utilizing participant and non-participant observation over the course of several years, this study explores the ritualistic deviant conduct within the male collegiate rugby subculture. The behavior is framed in terms of a functional group phenomenon that appears to be largely perpetuated by the notions of homophobia, machismo, and misogyny. Variations of social learning theories are discussed as possible

frameworks by which to examine this unique behavior in future analyses.

In the early 1980s a northeast collegiate men's rugby team was expelled from campus by its university for what one team member recalled was simply a "a harmless prank." While suspension of university clubs, athletic or otherwise, is not particularly newsworthy, this club had executed a gruesome prank for its annual alumni game. The evening before the game, several team members broke into one of the university's medical school buildings and stole a cadaver. The next day the rugby players dressed the cadaver in a team uniform and seated it in a lounge chair along the sidelines far from where living spectators normally watched the team play. The body remained where it was placed throughout the day with only a few of the rugby players and spectators aware of its "condition." It wasn't until after the game that university officials learned of the presence of the dead body at the school-sanctioned event. School officials immediately began the process of expelling the responsible team members and the club as a university-recognized entity.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years a great deal of attention has been focused on the criminal and non-criminal conduct of athletes in mainstream professional sports such as football, baseball, and basketball. Collegiate athletics also have come under the watchful gaze of the media and others, but owing to state and federal confidentiality laws, many criminal or deviant acts often go unreported when committed on campus property. Overall, significant research has been generated that addresses both athletic deviance as a cultural artifact of a given society and the role that sport plays in male sex-role socialization (Curry 1991; Hughes and Coakley 1991; Kane and Disch 1993; Messner 1987). Still, relatively little has been written with respect to the deviant subcultures within

<sup>1</sup>The team remained on suspension for approximately five years to ensure, according to university officials, that all team members even peripherally involved in the caper would have graduated before the school allowed the club to resume activities. As is the case with many "pranks" of this sort, the expulsion earned the team a certain notoriety in the rugby community and several legends of the event remain, including the particularly onerous legend of some team members kicking and throwing the corpse's severed head around the field after the game had ended.

collegiate sports, particularly men's collegiate rugby. Notable exceptions include the work of Donnelly and Young (1985), Sheard and Dunning (1973), Nelson (1994), Wheatley (1988), and Schacht (1994).

The deviant acts committed within the collegiate rugby subculture are ritualistic in nature. The behaviors exhibited by these athletes appear to be learned once they have gained entry into the subculture, and are reminiscent of fraternity initiation rites or other similar degradation ceremonies (see Garfinkel 1956; Jones 2000). In addition, these activities are almost exclusively a group phenomenon; the extant literature indicates that these athletes rarely commit or participate in these deviant acts independent of their rugby subculture. These behaviors may range from rather benign activities, such as the boisterous singing of sexually explicit songs and physical horseplay, to more serious conduct involving binge drinking, vandalizing public property, the infliction of injury, and indecent exposure (Sheard and Dunning 1973). Finally, much of the deviance committed by those in the rugby subculture is often perceived as temporary or short-lived behavior. While the transitory nature of the deviant behavior may not be noteworthy to the participants, this does not obviate the sociological importance of examining the behavior and the concomitant reactions to the deviance.

Prior research suggests that the concepts of homophobia, misogyny, and machismo are salient ideologies embedded within male collegiate athletic subcultures (Curry 1991; Dundes and Stein 1985; Dunning 1986; Wheatley 1988; Whitson 1990). Regardless of the severity of the deviant activities, nearly all are driven and perpetuated by these notions that function to reaffirm the importance of masculinity as a prerequisite for participating in the sport. In a radical feminist critique, Lynskyj (1990) noted that the male athletic ethos is the embodiment of traditional values of masculinity, and the behaviors exhibited within these male-dominated subcultures serve to rationalize sexual differentiation and heterosexual male superiority.

This study is a heuristic, descriptive endeavor that explores a variety of deviant behaviors committed by male collegiate rugby players within the context of their athletic subculture. The notions of homophobia, misogyny, and machismo are

presented as the ideological catalysts that guide a majority of these ritualized performances. While the athletes themselves largely perceive their deviant conduct as ephemeral, the behaviors nevertheless have crucial manifest and latent functions for the group and its individual members. Variations of social learning theory also are presented and discussed, as they may prove viable theoretical frameworks for understanding the emergence of new and differing forms of deviant behavior within the institution of sport.

## METHOD

This study is based on active and non-active participant observations of more than 50 male collegiate rugby teams in both competitive and noncompetitive environments in the southeast region of the United States. Over the course of a four-year period, data were collected via the utilization of field notes that documented both observed behavior and information gleaned from players during unstructured, informal interviews. Unsolicited commentaries and dialogue between players and their associates were recorded, as these peripheral conversations lend valuable insight into the players' justifications and motivations for engaging in the behavior.<sup>2</sup>

## THE EVOLUTION OF RUGBY AS A DEVIANT ETHOS

For many devotees, rugby is far more than a mere game—it is an organized activity that affords its members the opportunity for social interaction. More often than not, this interaction culminates in ritualistic acts of functional or positive deviance before, during, and after the match. In short, the subculture of collegiate rugby functions as a figurative proving ground for excessive bravado and audacity. Athletes amplify their masculine attributes through participation in a variety of activities unique to the subculture, often at the expense of women, homosexuals, and less virile teammates. From an international perspective, Dunning (1986) exam-

<sup>2</sup>The first author's access to the rugby subculture under study arose from his direct involvement in multiple rugby organizations as a player, coach, administrator, and referee.

ined the nature of deviance among adult non-collegiate rugby players in countries such as England, Scotland, and New Zealand. Historically, the sport emerged in Great Britain; the subculture can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century, when British rugby circles (where women were initially included) diverged into male-only clubs as a response to the burgeoning feminist movements (Sheard and Dunning, 1973). The deviance that ensued was driven by misogyny, and functioned as a buffer between the suffragists and the threatened masculinity of the players. In recent decades, deviance in all-male European rugby circles has declined—a phenomenon that has been directly attributed to the increasing balance of power between men and women in those countries (Dunning, 1986; Sheard and Dunning, 1973).

In the United States, rugby (and its attendant deviance) is relatively new. Many not familiar with the game still consider it to be an emergent or “fringe” sport. Introduced to the United States in the late 1880s, the sport waned in popularity after the Olympic games of 1924. By the 1980s, however, a renewed interest was generated in collegiate rugby, due in part to increased television coverage of international matches. Both active and prospective participants are only recently beginning to explore and realize the possible benefits of membership in the subculture. Regardless of the age of the participants, rugby in the United States appears to be enduring the same scrutiny by college administrators as that experienced in traditional rugby countries such as Great Britain, New Zealand, and Australia (Muir and Rosenberg 1999).

Most athletic departments at universities and colleges across the country make concerted efforts to quell the extra-curricular activities of student-athletes in the more highly visible sports programs. This proactive policy most likely stems from the need to maintain a positive image of these athletes, given their status as virtual ambassadors of educational institutions across the country. On the other hand, collegiate rugby players often cultivate an aura of hooliganism, alcohol abuse, and sexual conquest. These behaviors are generally loathed by conventional society, but are accepted and usually expected by the players and their associates within the subculture. In an attempt to perpetuate this

aura of bravado, players, coaches, administrators, and even associates proudly don tee-shirts and display bumper stickers with such slogans as, "Rugby Players Eat Their Dead", "Rugby: Where Men are Men and So are the Women," "Terrorists Beware: Rugby Player Onboard," and the ubiquitous "Give Blood, Play Rugby."

## RITUAL, COHESION, AND FUNCTIONAL NECESSITY

The function of ritualistic behavior in society has significant sociological import. In keeping with the traditional Durkheimian perspective (1912=1965), rituals serve to maintain group cohesiveness, a sense of commonality, and a focus on an ideology or object much more significant than the individual (Collins and Makowsky 1989). Deviance, or the manner and style in which the deviance is performed, has its own importance in maintaining group cohesiveness, as Hebdige (1991) notes:

Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority', which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus (p. 18).

Regarding religious practices, McGuire (2002; 198) noted that, "Both language and ritual articulate the unity of the group and serve to separate that group from others." Howarth (1996) maintained bereavement rituals solidified mourners and functioned to provide a sense of control, unity, and understanding. Although these authors speak directly to the importance of non-athletic ritual, the general premise of the concept may be applied to any number of structured group behaviors within traditionally male-dominated preserves such as the military, fraternities, and sport.

A close parallel to ritualistic deviance within rugby subcultures is the work of Jones (2000), who examined the function and consequences of physically violent initiation rites and hazing among black fraternity organizations. He noted, "To many black Greeks, physical hardships speak much

more thunderously than intellectual challenge, for these hardships are thought to instill fraternal love and also serve as mechanisms which supposedly afford the pledge opportunities to prove his worth" (p. 121). In addition:

When taken together, ritual and tradition form almost impenetrable barriers which determine whether a person is accepted into the bond or denied access. Bonding rests on the supposition that every member participates in the same ceremony, hears the same words, and lives the same experience. If successful, this common experience gives the organization continuity and structure (p. 113).

While not directly examining these physically violent rituals vis-à-vis misogynistic or homophobic underpinnings, Jones clearly substantiates the significance of one form of subcultural deviance. Not only does it function to maintain societal ideals of masculinity, but the group's desired image of itself as well.

Those within the group generally view the manifest functions of deviant subcultural rituals as positive. Indeed, these non-conventional behaviors maintain the cohesiveness of the group, reaffirm the legitimacy of its existence, and provide members with a sense of shared identity and purpose. As such, these seemingly non-functional ceremonies are what Goffman (1959) referred to as functional necessities. While the behavior may appear odious to the external audience, it must be evaluated with the inherent exigencies of the group in mind (Collins and Makowsky 1989).

Nearly all subcultural enclaves create and maintain distinctive norms, values, and beliefs that are perceived as vital for the survival of the group. Moreover, these groups place a great deal of importance on their members' voluntary willingness to abide by these expectations. In this regard, participation in the group's ritual is viewed as altruistic; the more closely the individual's behavior parallels the philosophies of the group, the higher the degree of adulation and acceptance. Conversely, Collins and Makowsky (1989) noted that:

Social justice is harsh; if one does not live up to such rules, one is punished by one's fellows; and since one's self is



derived from others, one may well be stuck with a permanently spoiled identity as a faulty interactant, but all this is necessary to preserve symbolic reality for those who can participate in it (pp. 239-40).

Thus, for the male rugby player, his image in the context of the subculture is largely dependent upon the degree to which his behavior equals the expectations of his cohort; the more crude his behavior with regard to women or homosexuals, the less likely his actions will be negatively sanctioned by his peers. In contrast, hesitation to adhere to the group's norms and values will likely be met with ostracism, verbal harassment, or worse.

These androcentric rituals may simultaneously function as one of the many means by which society's sex-role expectations are reinforced in the individual. While subcultural camaraderie and sex-role socialization are both significant components in the lives of male athletes, these rituals are not without negative or latent consequences.

One such consequence is the paradoxical conundrum that emerges in the minds of young men who subscribe to these rigid societal definitions of masculinity. Young male athletes are encouraged to exhibit aggressive yet emotionally distant personae; as Gilder (1995) noted, "The sex that is the more competitive will tend to win more competitions" (in Petrikin, 1995; 95-6). If men desire to transcend these socially ascribed expectations, they do so at their own peril. Kupers and Letich (1995) observed:

Many of us would like to cross the lines of traditional masculinity, the lines one does not cross if one wants to avoid being perceived as unmanly. There is always the risk that, if a man relaxes his guard, and displays too much tenderness, or if he is too willing to cop his foibles, then he will be mocked by other men. So, as adults, we don't touch each other (except in those exuberant post-touchdown moments) (p. 175).

Finally, the participation in and promotion of activities directly grounded in homophobic or misogynistic ideologies function to perpetuate the notions of male superiority, the devaluation of women, and the intolerance of men who fail to exhibit traditional expectations of masculinity.

## RUGBY DEVIANCE AS LEARNED BEHAVIOR

Given the unique nature of the deviant conduct inherent within the male collegiate rugby subculture, the processes by which new and existing players learn, rationalize, and continue the behavior are germane to understanding this phenomenon. While the study at hand primarily focuses on the functions of and catalysts driving deviant ritualistic behavior in an athletic subculture, social learning perspectives may offer an additional theoretical framework by which to evaluate this form of subcultural behavior in future analyses.

Social learning perspectives were directly derived, developed, and modified from the early work of Gabriel Tarde, who proposed that criminal behaviors are learned through three laws of imitation—contact, imitation of superiors, and insertion (Hunter and Dantzker 2002; Tarde 1912). Sutherland's (Sutherland and Cressey 1978) Differential Association theory expanded Tarde's original concepts, specifically arguing that learning criminal or deviant behavior involves more than mere imitation. Sutherland asserted deviant behavior is learned via the same mechanisms as conforming behavior, however this proposition remained nebulous in that he failed to identify the nature of the mechanisms themselves (Akers and Sellers 2004; Cullen and Agnew 2003). Furthermore, although Sutherland noted that criminal or deviant behavior emerges from an exposure to and adoption of an excess of definitions favorable to norm violation, his theory did not adequately define or expound upon the concept "*definitions*" [our emphasis] (Cullen and Agnew 2003).

Burgess and Akers' (1966) Social Learning Theory emerged as a modification of Sutherland's earlier work, and attempted to more adequately detail the processes of learning by incorporating principles of operant conditioning and reinforcement (Hunter and Dantzker 2002). This reformulation of Differential Association specifically denoted the importance of social context with regard to deviant or criminal behavior. In other words, an athlete's propensity to engage in subcultural deviance is influenced not only by associating with those who are also deviant or espouse deviant ideas, but also by situating himself in an environment that fosters or promotes the behavior (see Akers and Sellers

2004). Furthermore, Akers' later work offered a more cogent characterization of "definitions," some of which are described as,

one's own attitudes or meanings that one attaches to given behavior. That is, they are orientations, rationalizations, definitions of the situation, and other evaluative and moral attitudes that define the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified (Akers 1994, in Cullen and Agnew, 2003; 144).

Thus, Akers' modified learning approach acknowledges variables that may better identify one's motives for either engaging in deviant conduct or refraining from it. Finally, Akers' perspective relies on four general notions—*differential associations* (which may be primary or secondary=reference groups), approving *definitions* (which may be positive or neutralizing), *differential reinforcement* (which may be either social or non-social), and *imitation* (which depends upon the nature of the behavior, the models, and the consequences of the act) (Akers and Sellers 2004).

With respect to the collegiate rugby players under observation here, these notions are quite significant. The rugby subculture itself provides the individual with a secondary or reference group, which, in turn, reinforces his behavior with either rewards or some type of sanction. In this case, the reinforcement is largely social—as previously noted, most if not all of the deviance observed occurred exclusively within a group setting. Independent of his rugby subculture, the athlete appears to receive no reinforcement for engaging in the behavior because its meaning or function is largely irrelevant in his conventional social environments.

Akers' notion of definitions is pertinent here, in that he differentiated between an individual's temporary adherence to ideologies or beliefs versus a more permanent adoption of thoughts or behavior. For instance, an athlete's approving "positive definition" of deviant conduct insinuates that his behavior is "morally desirable or *wholly* permissible" [our emphasis] (Akers and Sellers p. 86). In contrast, the player's "neutralizing definition" of the conduct denotes a more temporary or ephemeral engagement in the behavior. As Akers and Sellers (2004: 86) noted, "Neutralizing definitions favor the commission of crime by justifying or excusing it. They

[the actors] view the act as something that is probably undesirable but, *given the situation*, is nonetheless all right, justified, excusable, necessary, or not really bad to do” [our emphases].

These assumptions correspond well with those of Sykes and Matza (1957), who not only addressed techniques for neutralizing deviant or criminal behavior, but also how a deviant may distinguish or discriminate between legitimate victims and those considered off limits. For instance, the authors posited that miscreants may target victims in this study—women and homosexuals—because of social distance. In other words, deviant or antisocial behavior directed toward specific groups may be a function of the amount of social distance (shared characteristics, kinship, qualities, sex) between the deviant and his victim or target. Given that rugby remains largely a male-dominated preserve typically characterized by amplified or exaggerated masculinity, these propositions have merit when further evaluating the conduct described in this study.

## OBSERVATIONS

Although the units of analyses in this study are confined to the southeastern United States, the extant literature (as well as extensive personal observations of rugby organizations in all regions of the country) support the assumption that the behaviors and activities described herein are fairly consistent with those found in other regions of the country, and thus provide the reader with a somewhat accurate depiction of the American collegiate rugby ethos. More often than not, the deviance committed by the athletes under study was ephemeral in nature, and appeared to serve as a cathartic respite from their conventional daily routines. It was common for these young men to return to their normal academic agendas or other activities a short time after games and the ensuing post-match celebrations. In fact, players frequently brought work clothes with them to the matches; immediately after the game-related activities, players changed out of their athletic gear and went directly to work or to other pre-arranged college functions.

It also became apparent during the span of this research that the male collegiate rugby subculture shares both striking similarities and vast differences with non-collegiate male

subcultural milieus such as exotic gentlemen's clubs and private health and fitness facilities. For instance, the collegiate rugby players often have a central location similar to a fraternity house in which several players will live together. These rugby houses serve as the central meeting place for team social gatherings, post-game parties, and disseminating any information pertinent to future matches or practices.

Similarly, private gentlemen's clubs and health facilities equally serve as common locations for engaging in male camaraderie. Quite often, men will gather in these environments to recreate, bond, and occasionally discuss business-related matters. What differentiates the rugby environment from other exclusively male domains is largely logistical. Whereas non-collegiate men's spheres provide only brief opportunities for socialization, the rugby house is far more central to the very existence and survival of the subculture.

### Deviance and the Ideology of Machismo

Collegiate rugby players engage in the sport for various reasons. A great number of players, however, play or associate themselves with collegiate rugby because of the aura of machismo that envelopes the sport. Considered an exaggerated form of masculinity, machismo can include the amplification of prescribed masculine attributes such as sexual prowess and conquest, excessive alcohol consumption, displays of courage or violence, and the prolific use of vulgarity. The concept of machismo is common in the realm of sport where athletes exhibit similar forms of exaggerated posturing. For instance, Weinstein, et al. (1995) noted that pre-professional hockey coaches viewed their players as more athletically competent if the athletes engaged in physical altercations above and beyond those required during the course of a game. The concept of machismo is largely misunderstood by many as simply a Latino phenomenon. As Klein (2000: 68) suggests,

Machismo has been used by scholars and authors to describe male assertiveness and control over everything from nature to society. In its most succinct form, machismo is defined as a template for male behavior that reifies aggression and domination as uniquely male attributes and re-projects them to every area of culture.

In contrast, rugby players differentiate themselves from other athletes such as hockey, football, and lacrosse player by noting that their chosen sport eschews all but the bare minimum of padding or protective gear. Quite often, collegiate rugby athletes refer to lacrosse players as “pricks with sticks.” The use of protective gear by football players, for instance, became fodder for a popular tee shirt that circulated throughout the rugby subcultures under study here. The phrase “Pads Are For Pussies, Blood Is For Men” was clearly emblazoned across the front, communicating a less-than-subtle reference to menstruation. The cartoon caricature on the shirt depicted a rugby player with a soiled tampon flung over his shoulder, further exemplifying the toughness (and misogyny) expected of collegiate rugby players.

Injuries also are considered badges of honor among these athletes. In one instance, a rugby player suffered a large abrasion on his neck during a match. After the game he proudly pointed to the wound and remarked, “Look, my first injury! Isn’t it cool?” This player’s remark is a fitting example of the assertions of Brown (2002), who noted that suffering and the endurance of an excessive amount of pain reinforce the notion that heterosexual masculinity, sexiness, and bravado are partially gauged by one’s ability to tolerate and prevail over injury. In one collegiate match refereed by the first author, a player suffered a serious compound fracture of his lower leg. While waiting for emergency medical personnel to remove the injured player from the field, an opposing player approached him and curiously inspected the jagged bone protruding from the bloodied sock just above the ankle. The opponent remarked, “Oh, he just has a hard-on (erection). Pour some water on it and let’s get on with the game.” Male players who suffer injuries that result in blood flow are advised by their teammates to wipe the blood from their bodies. Several times over the course of this study, non-injured players would look at a bleeding teammate or opponent and remark, “He’s just having his period.”

Evans et al. (1998) proffered the idea that violent activities such as dog fighting actually contain symbolic elements of masculinity. As such, some working-class men will engage in this illegal conduct to bolster their status as virile, especially when other conventional opportunities for doing

so are limited. Nelson (1994) further noted that sports violence plays an integral role in maintaining male supremacy in society as a whole. In addition, he added that sports violence (and by extension, violent innuendos directed toward homosexuals and women) is perceived as acceptable both on and off the field:

Nowhere are masculinity and misogyny so entwined as on the rugby field. At the post-game parties that are an integral part of the rugby culture, drunken men sing songs that depict women as loathsome creatures with insatiable sexual appetites and dangerous sexual organs. Men sing of raping other men's girlfriends and mothers. Rape is also depicted as a joke (Nelson 1994: 88).

The consumption of alcohol is a central activity within many male-dominated subcultures, including men's collegiate sports. Collective consumption is a means by which masculine hegemony is achieved within the context of the group; even in advertisements, alcohol is the vehicle by which social prescriptions of masculinity are transmitted and reaffirmed to prospective consumers (Gough and Edwards 1998; Hunt and Waldorf 2000; Lemle and Mishkind 1989; Smith 2002). At practices and during drills and exercises, the players under study often were overheard discussing their sexual conquests of the previous evening. These conversations almost always revolved around the amount of alcohol consumed during the night, as well as the successful or unsuccessful sexual conquests by fellow teammates at post-match parties. Players who failed to have a sexual encounter with a female, or who became physically ill because of excessive consumption, were openly ridiculed in front of their teammates.

One collegiate team regularly performed a pre-game ritual involving the chugging of beer. Players stood on the sidelines and, on a pre-determined signal, opened a can of beer and drank (chugged) it as fast as possible. The players would then sprint onto the field to begin the game. As one player related afterward, the object was not necessarily to determine who could drink the beer the fastest, but rather who would vomit the earliest during the course of the game. If a player did become physically ill (and in each instance one or more did)

the player's teammates would cheer and taunt him at the stoppage of play.

It is common to hear both coaches and players insult each another during practices or during games. Typically, these insults involve the use of demeaning, feminized language (see Schacht 1997). Opponents and teammates alike that do not meet the criteria for acceptable standards of machismo are oftentimes overtly labeled as "sissies," "fags," or "pussies," players who are called such names during a game or practice frequently become targets for physical violence by other players. At times, this ridicule resembles ribbing or just good-natured fun, but the underlying message is clear—those individuals who have an abundance of sexual conquests and who can hold their liquor or beer are to be admired and emulated.

Schacht (1994) noted that on the playing field, code words for specific rugby plays are patently obscene and would not be tolerated in most social circles; a similar trend was observed during this research. In one instance, a player called out a signal near a group of several dozen spectators comprised mostly of college students and players' parents. The player's audible signal consisted of a reference to Jesus and the Virgin Mary engaging in sexual intercourse. The obscene signal was greeted with cheers by some of the players, with laughter by some of the college-age spectators, and with horror by the players' parents watching the match. At half-time, several parents and other spectators asked that the referee immediately take action to halt further such behavior. When the captain of the offending team was apprised of the parents' request, his reply was, "Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke."

## Deviance and the Ideology of Misogyny

The post-match party is a key event at which a good portion of rugby deviance may be observed. It is usually at these celebrations where the majority of misogynistic-driven behaviors emerge, often in the presence of female associates who have accompanied the players to the celebration. The post-game festivities traditionally begin when both the home and visiting teams congregate at a local rugby house;



opponents are first treated to free food and beer, and then join the host team in party games, pranks, dances, and the singing of traditional rugby songs (see Schacht 1997).

One frequently observed ritual was the Zulu Warrior Dance, a performance intended as a mockery of female erotic dancers (see Dunning 1986). New players who scored their first goal (or try) in the earlier match were often goaded to perform this dance, which involved the player (or Zulu) stripping naked while fellow revelers doused him with beer. Once the player was completely nude, he was required to run (or streak) through the group while being cheered on by both men and women. Players recently joining the team were most often targeted for participation in these displays of nudity, which were not just limited to semi-private venues such as rugby houses. On several occasions, the Zulu dance was performed in both public bars and restaurants, often with the tacit approval of the proprietors. Players who refused to participate in this ritual were oftentimes forcibly disrobed, and were the brunt of ostracism and harassment for weeks afterward.

Similar to the Zulu Warrior Dance is another nudity ritual known as Father Abraham. One new player, who had earlier voiced his desperation to become part of the group, volunteered for this activity. As his fellow players would complete a verse to the song, the new player removed an article of clothing, which quickly culminated in full nudity. During this strip-tease ritual, the player would hand articles of clothing to his mother and sister, who happened to be in attendance. His mother later remarked, "I certainly wasn't expecting that!"

Women who attend these post-game functions are not always ancillary associates. Women also become actively involved in the nudity rituals, but are typically treated as the subjugated foci of male entertainment. At many parties following the match, a rugby "queen" is elected. The selection of the "queen" often is based on the players' perceptions of whether the woman will remove any or all of her clothing while the male participants sing to her. In nearly every incident observed, the woman was hoisted on the shoulders of two players while one person led the group in a song denigrating the woman's physical features.

If the “queen” was an unwilling participant, players placated her by handing her cups of beer or other alcoholic beverages. She was then encouraged to douse the singing men while they chanted, “Show us your tits!” and “Skin to win!” Comments such as these were almost always fueled by the hopes that the woman would eventually disrobe, at least partially. If the “queen” did not accommodate the male revelers, she was often booed and soaked with beer at the conclusion of the song. Schacht (1997) observed some disquieting effects that these rituals can have upon some of the women involved. At one rugby party, a young woman became noticeably upset by the derogatory nature of the songs. He noted, “The woman was so upset she began to cry. She continued to cry for several more minutes and then left, apparently by herself” (Schacht 1997: 339).

In one instance, a college woman who had been chosen “queen” removed her shirt and bra for the cheering singers. Other women joined in removing their shirts and bras as well, which could be interpreted as an effort to gain acceptance into the deviant subculture. Women’s behavior changes dramatically, however, if they began dating a player. Because the spouses or girlfriends of rugby players are considered “off-limits” to the offensive rituals within the subculture, many of the players’ intimate partners would exit to another room with other non-participating women and rejoin the party once the rituals ceased.

The reactions of women attending rugby matches and the post-match parties were somewhat intriguing. When asked for her reaction to a particularly offensive rugby song entitled “The S & M Man,” a young woman responded, “Oh, they don’t mean anything by it. They’re just having fun.” This appeared to be the typical reaction, as most women apparently accepted the deviant behavior as short-term, and approached the deviancy itself as a sexual “sport” in which they could become active participants.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Aside from women in general, female rugby players are not immune from the misogynistic onslaught exhibited and communicated by their male counterparts. Women rugby players are often referred to as “dykes on spikes,” fitting both the misogynistic and homophobic notions referred to throughout this research.

## Deviance and the Ideology of Homophobia

Homophobia is a salient theme within both collegiate and non-collegiate male athletic subcultures (Dundes and Stein 1985; Pronger 1999). This ideology is especially palpable when evaluating the ritualistic behaviors of rugby players, both on and off the field. The players observed during the course of this research often taunted their opponents with calls of “faggot” or “queer,” but were only sporadically sanctioned by the referee with a penalty of “conduct detrimental to the spirit of the game.”<sup>4</sup> This process of feminizing an opponent through language was aptly explained by Pronger (1999), who noted that humiliating or otherwise taunting an adversary is simply rooted in the desire to win and the aversion to losing. However, the concepts of winning and losing are situated in a sexualized domain; winning is viewed as a dominant (or *penetrating*) act, and losing is perceived as a submissive (*penetrated*) feminine act [our emphases]. Thus, the demeaning homophobic dialogue between adversaries is a constant struggle where power differentials (masculine versus feminine) are maintained.

Traditional rugby songs not only focused on the sexual conquest or denigration of women; they also served as vehicles for perpetuating the notions of ideal masculinity vis-à-vis effeminate or less-virile men. While singing at post-game parties, players would alter their voices and exaggerate feminine gestures. This behavior oftentimes included lisping and holding one’s wrist limply, usually to the laughter and applause of those observing the behavior.

One ritual standing in direct contradiction to this standard of homophobia was referred to as the “elephant walk.” During this activity, participants stooped forward, reached one hand back between their legs, and grasped the hand of the participant behind them. The participants then walked nude through the party, exited the room, and reappeared fully clothed moments later. In one variation of this activity, the participants grasped the penis of the person in front of them, swinging their free arm in front of them as to emulate an elephant’s trunk. When the homosexual nature of the act

<sup>4</sup>Rules that rugby players adhere, or are supposed to adhere, are referred to as “laws.” Law 10 sanctioning foul play allows the referee wide latitude in suspending a player from a match or dismissing the player from the match for gross or repeated violations of law.

was later pointed out to one participant, he became defensive and snapped, "I ain't a fag!" Questions of sexual preference were oftentimes met with hostility and anger—in several instances, serious arguments or fistfights ensued.

Another contradictory ritual observed at several rugby parties was that of the "flaming land shark," again requiring at least some intimate same-sex physical contact between male participants. Hoisted face down upon the shoulders of his teammates, a new (and usually unwilling) player is stripped naked and a cardboard "shark fin" is inserted between the cheeks of his buttocks. He is then paraded through the crowd, flailing his arms in a swimming motion, while those in attendance sing the theme music from the film *Jaws*. Oftentimes, unbeknownst to the player, the cardboard fin is set afire and eventually the player is haphazardly tossed from a balcony or porch into the waiting arms of players below, the flaming fin still intact.

The analysis of Lewis and Karin (1994) is useful in attempting to understand the contradictory nature of physical contact between heterosexual males. While their research specifically focused on male playground behavior, they noted that physical contact between boys is negotiated in terms of authorized versus unauthorized. In other words, same-sex physical contact is either positively or negatively sanctioned depending upon the context in which it occurs (see also Dundes and Stein 1985). Thus, for male rugby players, the same-sex contact that occurs at post-game parties is viewed as an extension of the masculine competition during the match, and should not be construed as actual homosexual behavior that would ultimately subvert the foundational principles of the subculture.

## DISCUSSION

While the non-collegiate European rugby ethos has been the focus of several analyses, there is a dearth of literature that attends to the deviance that materializes within the North American collegiate subculture. Young (1988: 290) noted:

Stated very crudely, while cultural forms associated with the game have very recently decreased in their performance and manifestation in one setting (United Kingdom), they have

escalated in others (North American) and preliminary attempts at interpreting this recent change in events have already been made.

The decline of deviance within European rugby circles has been attributed to any number of factors. Sheard and Dunning (1973) recognized the decreasing power differentials between men and women as a possible variable, while Dunning (1986) proffered that the deviance diminishes as the players alter or adjust their associations with those who participate in the game. Deviance emerging from the male collegiate sector in the United States, however, has dramatically increased as the sport has enjoyed a rise in exposure and popularity.

The deviance observed during the course of this research included both criminal and non-criminal activities. Furthermore, these behaviors were found to be largely group phenomena, uniquely ritualistic, and ephemeral in nature. Notions of machismo, misogyny, and homophobia perpetuated a vast majority of the deviance, and more often than not these ideologies operated dialectically rather than independent of one another. It also was apparent that these behaviors, whether occurring in competitive or non-competitive environments, functioned to provide the players with a sense of belonging, unity, and purpose within the context of the subculture.

The data for this research were collected via active and non-active participant observations and field notes over the course of more than four years. While this methodology does not adequately yield findings pertaining to individual motivations, proclivities, and beliefs vis-à-vis deviant behavior, it does tender a rich, descriptive analysis of the ritualistic behaviors occurring within these subcultures (Bryant 1980; see also Best, 2004). Pertaining specifically to the sociology of sport, Loy and Segrave (1974: 301) asserted:

[Participants as observers have provided accounts] which usually afford the greatest sociological insight as they are written by individuals whose explicit intent from the outset of their observation is to describe and explain the social patterns, problems, and processes associated with a specific group.

We also acknowledge that researcher immersion into the subculture under study presents issues of compromised objectivity, subject habituation, and bias (see Bryant 1980). Schacht (1997) further noted the difficulties in passively observing disturbing behaviors and ideologies to which the researcher does not necessarily subscribe or partake. However, given the goal of this study as largely descriptive and as a platform for future endeavors, the assertions of Thomson (1977: 104) are useful in explaining the qualitative principle of “going native:”

It could be argued, however, that it is impossible for the sociologist to approach any issue, or problem under investigation without certain preconceived ideas and presuppositions. Obviously, an attempt must be made by the involved observer to recognize and identify such presuppositions... There is nothing to suggest that by adopting the role of involved observer scientific objectivity will *necessarily* be comprised [our emphases].

Given the paucity of research on deviance within male collegiate rugby subcultures, several questions remain requiring further analyses. As previously noted, the behaviors observed were largely driven by the ideologies of machismo, homophobia, and misogyny. The deviant activities also were short-lived, and usually abandoned at the completion of the rugby season. Because observations of behavior did not yield the players' rationales for entering the subculture, it is largely unclear as to whether a “rugby personality” exists. In other words, further exploration into this topic may reveal whether the males who engage in rugby deviance actually subscribe to homophobic or misogynistic ideologies prior to entering the subculture. This question reflects concerns broached in earlier critiques of social learning perspectives, in that it is largely uncertain as to whether deviance is a result of “birds of a feather flocking together,” or birds “joining the flock and changing their feathers” (Akers and Sellers 2004: 98).

The question also remains as to what extent, if at all, these ideologies are internalized within the individual once he exits the rugby subculture. As a general rule, male collegiate rugby players place a great deal of importance on their involvement within the subculture, but do not appear to integrate this behavior into their conventional social lives

outside the subculture. Therefore, while these athletes can learn behaviors conducive to the goals and identity of the group, they may believe that these deviant acts, and the ideologies supporting them, are detrimental to their lives external of the subculture. Because of the ephemeral nature of the deviance, it is quite possible that the subculture simply functions as a temporary locus of resistance to the growing appeal of non-traditional masculine qualities such as exhibiting emotion or displaying affect and weakness (see Kupers and Letich 1995). While the learning process is difficult to directly observe and measure, other methods such as interviews or questionnaires in experimental pretest= posttest format could better detect to what extent an athlete possesses these ideologies prior to and exiting from the athletic subculture.

The questions we have posed here also may be extended to the exploration and analysis of the female collegiate rugby subculture, another largely neglected area of study. Preliminary observations of these female milieus indicate these women also engage in deviant subcultural behavior, albeit in different forms. It is of interest to explore what ideological notions support female rugby deviance, the rationales for participation, and whether the subculture provides female athletes a similar environment for resisting traditional societal expectations of femininity.

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