No excuse for athletes that commit crimes

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Sports excite us. They break our hearts, make our days and give us pride in our school or city. The people who play for our teams become beloved and treasured so much so that we fail to see them as humans, rather than our heroes. And so, when they are accused of crimes, especially heinous, violent acts, it is hard to accept the idea that someone we worship may not be the good person we think that they are.

Between the cases of ex-Stanford swimmer [Brock Turner](http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/06/us/sexual-assault-brock-turner-stanford/) and the extenuating circumstances at [Baylor University](http://espn.go.com/college-football/story/_/id/16491025/baylor-art-briles-acknowledge-serious-shortcomings-response-sexual-violence) and their cover up of sexual assault, it seems as if we have reached a point in our society where we view athleticism as being superior to morality. Many think that because someone is a tremendous athlete they surely cannot be capable of doing anything wrong. These cases aren’t limited to college either, though they do present a reason for gifted athletes to feel untouchable. All four major sports leagues, the [NFL](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/11/sports/football/domestic-violence-is-a-recurring-quandary-for-the-nfl.html?_r=0), [NHL,](http://www.sbnation.com/nhl/2016/1/15/10775322/nhl-instates-mandatory-domestic-violence-and-sexual-assault-training) [MLB](http://thinkprogress.org/sports/2016/05/14/3778428/jose-reyes-mlb-domestic-violence-suspension/) and [NBA](http://www.cbssports.com/nba/news/derrick-rose-heads-to-new-york-with-civil-rape-trial-looming/), have all seen their players be accused of horrendous acts, most often times against women. While the MLB’s reaction to these crimes has been the [least lenient,](http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/columnist/bob-nightengale/2016/05/13/mlb-jose-reyes-case-shows-mlb-policy-produces-consequences/84348508/) the responses to such acts in general even when the players are proven to having had commit them, have been insufficient and perpetuate the idea that gifted athletes can get away with wrong doing.

Of course, accusations can be inaccurate and innocent until proven guilty stands as the basis for criminal investigations in the United States. But, when the athletes who bring us so much happiness may have done something wrong, it’s hard not to feel strange the next time they score a goal or hit a home run. Though the accused will almost always have instant support surrounding them during an investigation, and the possible victim will have to fight tooth and nail just to get their story heard.

Cases of sexual assault and domestic violence often spike these defensive reactions the most- and those who react this way are truly missing the point. Your favorite athlete may not be the perfect person you think he is. In fact, you do not even really know them. Loving the people who play for your favorite team is completely understandable, but their prowess as an athlete does not ensure that they are a good person incapable of ever doing wrong. It should make us uncomfortable to root for someone who may have committed a heinous act. Unfortunately, not everyone sees it that way.

To make matters worse, sports stars that are accused of crimes are often able to get off with a lesser punishment than if they were a non-famous person. Of course, money is probably more of a factor in the outcome of their cases than their stardom as victims often become so distraught with the public reaction to their accusation that they decided it is not worth it to continue on with court proceedings. The leagues they play for are less than quick to condemn their acts, especially if said player is a star in their league.

The fact that athletes are almost always given public support in times of criminal investigations is problematic because it marginalizes the victim of crime. Rape culture persists because the reaction to women who accuse men of sexual assault is so overwhelmingly negative that it makes it harder for them to come forward.

Recently, an article written for [Think Progress](http://thinkprogress.org/sports/2016/04/13/3768242/kope-bryant-rape-case-legacy/) profiled the Kobe Bryant sexual assault case.

The five-time NBA Champion recently retired to much acclaim, and his 2003 sexual assault case was never even mentioned as a part of his career. Rather, people focused on his ability to play basketball well and seemingly deemed that talent as qualifying him as a good person. In fact, Bryant has even admitted to having sexual contact with his accuser. However, he believed it was consensual. The incident itself lasted five minutes and the accuser left his hotel room bloody and disheveled. Despite much evidence against him, Bryant was not charged with the crime. He went on to have a fantastic rest of his career, winning two more titles and retiring as the NBA’s third all-time scorer.

Kobe Bryant’s case resulted in some of the worst victim blaming ever seen. Because his accuser had agreed to go to Bryant’s room, many seemed to call foul on her allegations of assault. This is common in many sexual assault cases as the question “What was the woman wearing?” is often asked before “What actually happened here?”

Perhaps the most recent, well-known recent case is of former Baltimore Ravens player [Ray Rice](http://www.sbnation.com/nfl/2014/5/23/5744964/ray-rice-arrest-assault-statement-apology-ravens). It is a major understatement to say this case was not handled by the team or league properly. Video surfaced of Rice punching his wife in the face in an elevator, and it still took time for him to be suspended from the league. While he has not played an NFL game since 2014, the Ravens recently brought him into their rookie camp to teach the team’s newest players about [“life lessons.”](http://espn.go.com/nfl/story/_/id/15751161/ray-rice-speaks-baltimore-ravens-rookies) Now perhaps Rice has learned from his mistakes and is now a better man because of it, and good for him if this is true, but it says a lot that the Ravens are even willing to bring him back in minor roles with the team.

In complete fairness, we have seen a case of domestic violence in which the accused is a woman and she was given the same reaction to her male counterparts that have been accused of similar crimes. Soccer star [Hope Solo](http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/soccer/2014/08/19/hope-solo-domestic-violence-charges-us-soccer/14315989/) was accused of abusing her sister and 17-year-old nephew. As she faced her court battle, the soccer league did nothing to discipline her. They even encouraged her to continue to play as she worked towards a shutout record. Though a great majority of famous athletes who have been accused of violent crimes have been male, it is worth mentioning that the most prominent female athlete to have been accused of something similar have also received lax punishments from their employers.

Now, the average person who commits a crime may not get fired or disciplined at their job unless it interferes with directly with their work, but athletes are different. Young kids aspire to be just like the world’s most successful athletes, they get paid tons of money for not only their talent, but for who they are as a person. It should mean something to people who find such great success in the world of athletics to have people look up to them. When they cannot act with the integrity they should, they deserve to be suspended until the legal proceedings play out. Accusations can be proven wrong, but case after case of athletes doing wrong have been met with way too much impunity. If we teach our children to look up to their favorite athletes, it should be because they are a good person in addition to their talents on the field.

Violence from these beloved individuals cannot be excused or tossed aside, because of this, leagues need to act faster than they have to respond to these accusations. Innocent until proven guilty still stands, but it is important to realize it is not right to continue to cheer on someone who may have committed a heinous act.

There are many more cases of athletes being punished less than the average citizen for committing horrendous crimes, but the fact that this is such a common occurrence says a lot about how we raise gifted athletes from the start.

Brock Turner and Baylor University are products of a society that tells young men who are athletically superior that they can get away with their mischief. Sure, most of the time that mischief is underage drinking or minor drug use, but when the athlete’s actions cause detrimental harm to others they do not deserve to be let off easy.

Now, I love sports as much as the next person. But I want my teams to be represented by people I can respect. If that comes at the cost of the team losing their star player who did something awful, then so be it.