Out Of Their League Essay, Research Paper

Out of Their League

In the book entitled Out of Their League, David Meggyesy describes his life as a football player from high school through his days with the St. Louis Cardinals of the National Football League (NFL). Born in 1941, Meggyesy was raised in a low-income household in Solon, Ohio. Like many athletes from impoverished backgrounds, he was able to use the game of football to better himself though both a full scholarship to Syracuse University and financial stability with the Cardinals. During his career, however, Meggyesy became increasingly disillusioned with the game of football and how its athletes were subject to tremendous physical and psychological turmoil from those in power—namely the coaches and the NFL team owners. He began to see the game of football from a conflict theorist point of view. This is the belief that sport is an opiate used to benefit those in power through the exploitation of athletes which enables those such as coaches and team owners to maintain their power and privilege in society. (Coakley, 1998) Meggyesy’s growing disenchantment with football and adoption of a conflict theorist point of view led him to retire from the Cardinals in 1969.

Research guided by conflict theory generally falls into the following categories: 1) studies of how athletes become alienated from their own bodies; 2) studies of how sports can be used to coerce and control people; 3) studies of sports and the development of commercialism in society; 4) studies of sports and various forms of nationalism and militarism; and 5) studies of sports and racism and sexism. (Coakley, 1998) In the book, Meggyesy provided examples of each of these categories which occurred during his football career. These examples will be presented in the following paragraphs.

As previously mentioned, one category that conflict theorists study is how athletes become alienated from their own bodies. Such studies examine whether sports lead athletes to define and experience their bodies as machines designed to produce entertainment and profits for others rather than feelings of pleasure for themselves. (Coakley, 1998) Meggyesy described this phenomenon when he said:

I also realized, paradoxically, how cut off and removed I was from my body. I knew my body more thoroughly than most men are ever able to, but I had used it and thought of it as a machine, a thing that had to be well-oiled, well-fed, and well-taken-care of, to do a specific job. (Meggyesy, 1970, p. 231)

Unfortunately, maintaining this “machine” often meant that athletes would use drugs such as amphetamines, barbiturates, steroids, or cortisone injections not for the purpose of treatment and cure, but for the purpose of stimulating the mind and body in order to perform more violently as a professional. (Meggyesy, 1970) The prevalence of these drugs in the NFL could be seen in Meggyesy’s words, “Most NFL trainers do more dealing in these drugs than the average junky.” (Meggyesy, 1970, p. 83)

Meggyesy’s coaches also treated athletes as machines because their concern for the well-being of athletes was only to the extent that they could contribute to their primary concern of winning games. For example, while Meggyesy was at Syracuse University, the primary concern of the coaches was to win a national championship by any means possible. This meant that they usually enrolled the athletes in remedial courses to help keep them academically eligible. It also meant providing them with answers to test questions, giving them credit for courses never taken, and getting others to take finals or write term papers for them. In doing this, the athletes were left in a real predicament when their eligibility was complete. Since they could no longer contribute to winning, they were no longer supported by the coaches and were faced with a tough schedule of classes because of all the remedial courses taken. This abandonment by the coaches caused most of the athletes to drop out of school without receiving a degree. In fact, of the twenty-six players in Meggyesy’s class, only he and two others received degrees. (Meggyesy, 1970)

Meggyesy also observed the treatment of athletes as machines whenever they sustained an injury. In such an instance, he contended that the coaches and the team medical staff were more concerned about getting the athlete back on the playing field at the expense of the mental and physical well-being of the athlete. When Meggyesy once hurt his ankle, the team trainer told him it would take time for the injury to heal. However, when the coach confronted the trainer and asked if Meggyesy would be ready to play the next game, the trainer gave his assurances that he would be ready to go. This put Meggyesy in a difficult position since the burden would now be on him if he did not play. It would be a question of his courage and whether or not he had the guts to play. If he decided to play, he would likely re-aggravate the injury and spend more time in rehabilitation. However, if he decided not to play, he would be cut off and ignored by the coaching staff since he could no longer contribute to winning. (Meggyesy, 1970)

Conflict theorists also study how sports can be used by those in power to coerce and control people. (Coakley, 1998) Meggyesy acknowledged this power when he broke team curfew in high school and was suspended by the coach for one game. (Meggyesy, 1970) He said, “…I recognized the unlimited power those in control had, and I wanted to make sure they didn’t get me again.” (Meggyesy, 1970, p. 14) Meggyesy also tells of how a teammate of his with the Cardinals, who had suffered a series of knee injuries during the season, was unexpectedly called in by the coach to receive a punt, which was something he almost never had to do. (Meggyesy, 1970) Because of this demonstration of control by the coach, Meggyesy’s teammate needlessly suffered a career-ending knee injury on the resulting play. (Meggyesy, 1970).

Coaches can also coerce and control an athlete’s life outside the playing field. When Meggyesy began dating a girl in high school, his coach told him that a football player could not simultaneously sustain a relationship with a girl, adequately complete schoolwork, and be fully dedicated to football. He coerced Meggyesy into ending the relationship and then demonstrated his power by promising him a football scholarship to Syracuse University for complying with his wishes. (Meggyesy, 1970)

The power of coercion and control possessed by coaches was also seen as Meggyesy was trying to decide on where to attend college. After verbally committing to Syracuse University, Meggyesy reconsidered his decision and opted for Louisiana State University. Upon hearing his decision, the outraged Syracuse coaching staff flew him to campus for a meeting. By pressuring the teenage Meggyesy with feelings of guilt, the coaching staff coerced him into attending Syracuse University. (Meggyesy, 1970)

The third category conflict theorists study is the development of commercialism in society through sports. Such studies can focus on whether athletes are exploited to promote capitalistic expansion by crating profits for large corporations and wealthy people. (Coakley, 1998) Meggyesy provided an example of this in examining the operations of NFL team owners. During Meggyesy’s professional career, the profits of the NFL increased 4,300 percent but player salaries increased by only 73.6 percent. (Meggyesy, 1970) Subtracting the rises in the cost of living brought the salary increases to only 48.4 percent. (Meggyesy, 1970) Another example that Meggyesy provided was when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. Against the wishes of the players, the NFL decided not to postpone its games in the wake of one of the darkest tragedies in American history. NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle justified the decision by saying, “It has been traditional in sports for athletes to perform in times of great personal tragedy. Football was Mr. Kennedy’s game. He thrived on competition.” (Meggyesy, 1970, p. 145). Meggyesy viewed this justification as utter nonsense. He believed the actual reason for playing the games was because the various owners would have lost huge profits if they had postponed them. (Meggyesy, 1970)

Conflict theorists also study sports and various forms of nationalism and militarism. These studies examine whether sports create superficial, irrational, and potentially harmful feelings of nationalistic pride, and whether sports might be used to justify violence in society. (Coakley, 1998) Meggyesy asserted that football was being used to justify violence in society, more specifically the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. (Meggyesy, 1970) He believed this justification could be seen by observing the similarities between football and war. Meggyesy stated:

…there was this whole militaristic aura surrounding pro football, not only in obvious things like football stars visiting troops in Vietnam, but in the language of the game—‘throwing the bomb’, being a ‘field general’, etc., and in the unthinking obligation to ‘duty’ required of the players. In short, the game has been wrapped in red, white, and blue. (Meggyesy, 1970, p. 147)

The final category conflict theorists study is the sexism and racism found in sports. These studies examine whether sports divide people by race and gender, perpetuate racial stereotypes and distorted definitions of masculinity and femininity, and create racial and gender inequities in society. (Coakley, 1998) In terms of sexism, Meggyesy tells of his days at Syracuse University when it was “…healthy and manly to go out and get drunk, pick up some girl, lay her and maybe even rough her up a bit.” (Meggyesy, 1970, p. 75) Another example of sexism occurred later in his career. During a game with the Cardinals, Meggyesy ducked a tackle. The coach responded to this perceived act of cowardice by saying he looked “almost feminine” in making the tackle. (Meggyesy, 1970, p.181) As Meggyesy said:

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 eternally 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. (Meggyesy, 1970, p. 181)

Because of the coach’s comments, he went back to his hotel room and began to seriously doubt his ability to play professional football. (Meggyesy, 1970) In fact, the missed tackle left such an impression of failure in his mind that he seriously considered jumping out of his twelfth story window. (Meggyesy, 1970)

Meggyesy also described numerous instances of racism. During training camp with the Cardinals, Meggyesy noted that black and white players went their separate ways when practice was over. In addition, the team assigned rooms in the player dormitories on the basis of race, and blacks and whites were usually assigned to separate wings in the dorms. Such racism was also displayed by the players’ wives. For example, Meggyesy’s wife, Stacy, discovered that no blacks were invited to the parties held each year by the players’ wives. (Meggyesy, 1970)

Racism was also perpetuated when the Cardinals’ team roster was determined each season. Meggyesy revealed that:

Black ball players are selected even more stringently on the basis of ‘correct attitude’ than whites. Blacks are in an especially difficult position; if they act like Toms, they will be completely dominated by the white ball players and lose respect for themselves and each other. But if they are too ‘militant’ and try to assert their basic manhood by attempting to break out of the whites’ stereotype of the shuffling, dumb, insensitive jock, they are…often cut from the squad. (Meggyesy, 1970, p. 195)

In addition to these selection tactics, Meggyesy talked about the practice throughout the NFL of letting blacks play only certain positions. In fact, very few blacks held positions which were popularly thought to require a great deal of intelligence rather than a great deal of strength such as linebacker, offensive guard, and quarterback. (Meggyesy, 1970)

In reading the aforementioned examples that David Meggyesy provided in Out of Their League, it is apparent that he viewed the treatment of football players from a conflict theorist point of view. Since over a quarter century has passed since his book was published, I wanted to find out if his feelings on the subject have changed since then. It turns out that Meggyesy has played an integral part in improving the working conditions of NFL athletes. For the past eighteen years, he has served as the Western Director of the NFL Players Association (NFLPA). (David Meggyesy, Personal Communication, December 12, 2000) He believes that working conditions are much better today not only because of the NFLPA, but also because of the improved market conditions that have resulted from the national and international popularity of the league. (David Meggyesy, Personal Communication, December 12, 2000) As to what improvements still need to be made, his primary focus was on improving the treatment of collegiate athletes at institutions with “big-time” football and basketball programs. (David Meggyesy, Personal Communication, December 12, 2000) He believes these athletes are being exploited primarily because they do not receive a portion of the substantial revenues they help to generate for their respective institutions. (David Meggyesy, Personal Communication, December 12, 2000) Furthermore, because current NCAA rules make it difficult for these athletes to earn enough money to cover their normal living expenses, he believes they often have to turn to the “black market” (i.e. boosters) for financial support. (David Meggyesy, Personal Communication, December 12, 2000)

Like a conflict theorist, Meggyesy believes there are still improvements to be made in terms of the exploitation of athletes. Thus, it appears the five categories conflict theorists study will continue to be applicable to the game of football and to sports in general.

References

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Bibliography

Book Report for “Out of Their League”, which is a biography of former NFL player David Meggyesy. Gives a brief summary of the book and how conflict theory from the study of sociology can be applied to episodes in Meggyesy’s life.