

Girl Unprotected

Laura Robinson

It is the winter of 1996–97 and your daughter’s boyfriend is a junior hockey player. He lives with a bunch of other players and their coach in a hotel suite in Deseronto, Ontario.¹ The relationship does not venture outside the hockey rink or the hotel but the coach is always there and he has a reputation of ensuring players go to school, do their homework, keep their grades up and observe a curfew.

The coach and the players he brought with him have turned the team around. Once it could never win, now it seems never to lose and everybody loves a winner. Your daughter must be safe.

In 2004 you and the rest of Canada are shocked when Michael Jefferson, one of those star players who had since remade himself into Mike Danton in the NHL, pleads guilty to conspiracy to murder charges in St. Louis, and you learn it was David Frost, his coach back in Deseronto, now his agent, whom he conspired to have murdered. Both Danton and Frost deny a conspiracy or intent of any kind, but at least with a guilty plea there will be no investigation. Danton commences his jail term in New Jersey.

Your daughter and her best friend are now young women, removed from Deseronto and the near zero options small towns offer girls. There were no chances for them to become great junior players, because, like every other small town in Canada, Deseronto did not provide “professional” junior hockey teams for girls. In this highly gendered equation, girls were only allowed to

be adjectives that helped describe boys, much as hockey scores do. Shortly after the Danton story broke they went to the police.

With distance and maturity the girls understood that the limited sexual opportunities offered by their ex-boyfriends weren’t about loving the female body at all; rather they were twisted relationships that revolved around their all powerful coach. The coach Danton wanted dead.

In a Napanee courtroom this week one young woman said, “I felt uncomfortable with it, but . . . I felt kind of pressured to do it” referring to having to have sex with Mr. Frost. She added that she

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“didn’t want to do it again, but finally I got persuaded into it” after her boyfriend continued to pressure her to have sex once more with him and Mr. Frost.

Robin Warshaw wrote the groundbreaking book *I Never Called It Rape* in 1988. She went to university campuses across the United States and asked girls and young women if they had ever been raped. Almost exclusively they responded in the negative. Then she asked them if they had ever been pressured to have sex by someone who was much larger, who held power over them, who used intimidating or coercive tactics physically, psychologically or emotionally? Had they ever been brow-beaten into sex; simply worn down by a guy who wouldn’t take “no”? Had they ever agreed to have sex because it seemed to be the only way out of the situation? The answers came back in the affirmative.

The girls in Deseronto cooperated with police for over two years, but on March 6, 2007, Crown Attorney Adam Zegouras dropped the charges that concerned the alleged assaults against the girls, declaring there was insufficient evidence.

It was at this point that one of the girls finally gave the police her diary where she kept her most intimate and embarrassing recollections of what went on in the hotel room. Too late: the charges had been dropped and eventually her name, which I will not use, was disclosed to the media as everyone pretended she was a willing participant in acts that sexually exploited and degraded her in a situation she was coerced into.

Somehow, though, the charges involving hockey players who were allegedly abused in the exact same incidents at exactly the same time as the girls moved forward. These were the young men who the girls say colluded with Mr. Frost and persuaded them to have sex with their coach. Obviously Mr. Zegouras does not understand what acquaintance rape is, and how was Judge Geoffrey Griffin understanding it when he lifted the publication ban on the girls’ names?

These girls are all of our daughters. While writing *Crossing the Line: Violence and Sexual Assault in Canada’s National Sport* I found too many cases where the “justice” system propped up the hockey mythology and abandoned girls, blind to the cyclical nature of sexual abuse because such ugliness could not be part of hockey. In a subculture presided over with an iron fist, where garbage and garbage cans were thrown over players who didn’t play well, where Frost was convicted of assault after he punched a player in the face, everyone became a victim.

Girls’ bodies were objectified in the most absolute meaning of the word, becoming the surface on which and in which the real relationship—that between the coach and players—took place. Abusive sex was a stand-in

for hockey; the female body a stand-in for ice as Mr. Frost's players did as they were told. Like the Swift Current Broncos, who were paid \$50.00 to bring a girl back to their coach Graham James' house so he could videotape them having sex, these allegedly victimized players became victimizers.² James pled guilty to 350 counts of sexual assault at the exact same time Frost started his fiefdom in Deseronto. Plus ça change.

Girls, in a subculture where Frost told players they were "pussies" and 13 to put their skirts back on and go home, were not human beings. One ex-girlfriend testified she only came to the hotel when "invited." Determining when she saw her boyfriend and when and with whom she would have sexual activity was not her right; another tragic chapter in a litany of many that the hockey myth continues to deny.

NOTES

¹ Deseronto is a town on the northern shore of Lake Ontario, west of Kingston.

² Graham James coached junior hockey and was the subject of controversy when Sheldon Kennedy made allegations of sexual abuse against James. In 1997, James pleaded guilty to sexual assault charges and served jail time until his parole in 2001. In October 2010, James faced a new set of charges for sexual assault against the former NHL player Theoren Fleury. Fleury discusses his abuse by James in his autobiographical book, *Playing with Fire* (2009).

VOCABULARY

acquaintance rape—sexual assault where the victim knows the perpetrator

QUESTIONS

1. After reading what Robinson has to say about the dark side of hockey culture in Canada, do you think hockey should be a national symbol for Canada? Can Canada reconcile its pride in hockey (or should it), when hockey is revealed to be entrenched in such violence?
2. Robinson specifically introduces gender in this essay to highlight the limited opportunities that girls and women have in the hockey world. How do you see gender differences in hockey or in sport as a whole? While star athletes are generally held in high regard, what does this say about female role models for girls?
3. Robinson states that the girls are mere "adjectives that helped describe boys." Can you think of any scenarios where these gender roles might be reversed?

SUGGESTION FOR WRITING

Define the myth of hockey and write about which elements you believe are true and which elements you believe are false.