

Football Players Making a Better World
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

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On December 17th, the *New York Times* reported that the University of Minnesota football players called off their threatened boycott and will play in the Holiday Bowl game in San Diego on December 27th. They had said they would boycott the game if the university didn't lift the suspensions of 10 players involved in what an internal university investigation concluded was sexual assault and sexual misconduct with a woman, who, according to some accounts, was 22 years old and a university student.

Here is the police report on the case—no charges were filed. It is clear that the woman had a lot to drink and behaved very foolishly, but the behavior of the players was barbaric.

What I find most interesting in this case are three things that *didn't* happen.

First, the football team's season wasn't suspended. Earlier this year, Harvard cancelled its men's soccer team's season because of what players wrote about the physical appearance and sexual appeal of women players. Columbia's wrestling team's season was suspended while officials investigated text messages that were said to contain racist, misogynistic and homophobic terms. Princeton suspended its swimming and diving team's season for posting "vulgar and offensive" material on the team's electronic mailing list.

One can argue that a team's season should not be suspended because men noticed and commented on the sexual attractiveness of women or used bad language, but let's apply that standard to some text messages sent by the University of Minnesota players around the time of the assault. See if they sound vulgar and offensive or misogynistic to you:

“Party at my crib 331 invite hoes!!”
“I got 4 hoes where the party at”
“Go to the rail hella hoes”
“i just told some hoes”
“if she aint tryna fck imma be pissed.”
“run her?” [More than one man having sex with the same woman.]
“Me and the [football] recruit finna [going to] double team this bitch.”
“Lol we forreal going brazy [crazy] lol.”
“all 3 them n****s hitting rn [right now].”
“I’m sliding in some pussy rn lol”

Since this language has gotten a pass, I can conclude only that whatever was in the Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia correspondence must have been *really* out of line, or that different standards apply to the individuals involved in this case than to the Ivy League students.

Nobody said the Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia players actually *did* anything; it was just unacceptable talk that got their seasons suspended. The University of Minnesota Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action investigation concluded that players engaged in sexual assault. I am left to speculate about what these players would have had to do short of murder for the university to cancel the bowl game appearance. Or what they would have had to do for a women’s group or the media to have raised that possibility, or demonstrated disgust or outrage. Thus far they haven’t.

Second, although all ten of the Minnesota players in this case are black, as far as I can see, race has never—publicly at least—been mentioned. We know the players are black only because their pictures have been in the papers. Press reports have been mum on the victim’s race, but I presume she is white because the University of Minnesota is predominantly white, and if she hadn’t been white, that probably somehow would have been made public in order to

cool possible tensions. Needless to say, no one has suggested that if you are going to bring blacks of a certain type on campus to put on football and basketball shows this is what you are going to get.

I'm from Minnesota, and was a student at the university and later taught there. A white Minnesota friend's reaction to the incident is typical: He called it an "unfortunate set of circumstances." If we were back in 1910 or 1937 or 1958, would my friend have viewed what happened to this young, probably white, woman (or to any woman for that matter) as an unfortunate set of circumstances? I don't think so. In 2016, if ten white men had done this to a 22-year-old black woman, would the media have failed to mention their or her race, and would black people have called it an unfortunate set of circumstances? I don't think so.

And third, this episode didn't prompt a discussion of the merits of big time athletics, the possibility that extracurricular activities have gotten out of hand, with scholarships given for being good at playing with a ball and, in many cases, to individuals disposed toward anti-social behavior, and the university paying to transport and lodge a football team 1,987 miles from Minneapolis to San Diego to play against Washington State in something called the Holiday Bowl. What does any of that have to do with the university's mission?

The perspective that got the most news was that of the football coach, Tracy Claeys. Mr. Claeys hasn't found it necessary to say whether he backs the university's decision to suspend players involved in assaulting a woman, or what he thinks this says about his football program, but he has gone on record about the players who threatened to boycott the bowl game: "[I] have never been more proud of our kids. I respect their rights [and] support their effort to make a better world!"

For sure, Coach Claeys, that gets to the heart of this matter: football players trying to make a better world. That sums it right up.