

Play the Game  
Fourth World Communication Conference on Sport and Society  
November 6-10, 2005  
DGI-Byen, Copenhagen, Denmark  
Update on Canadian Hockey Scandal

By: Laura Robinson ([laura.robinson@sympatico.ca](mailto:laura.robinson@sympatico.ca))

Presented Wednesday, November 9, 2005

It gives me great pleasure to be in Copenhagen once more for the Play the Game conference amongst so many international good minds and good hearts. Truly we are friends, and these friendships will continue to build in the future.

In 2002 my research and writing on sexual abuse in Canadian junior hockey was met with a deep and intellectual understanding sorely lacking in my own country's sport media. This was a very pleasant shock, but a shock nonetheless as it was and is still so difficult to be the lone critical voice in the vast Canadian wilderness writing about the subculture surrounding ice-hockey in our country.

Background:

While I was very honoured to accept the Play the Game Award and understand the significance it holds in terms of writing, researching, and investigative journalism, it unfortunately made no difference at all to my unemployed status in Canada and I remain a free-lance journalist. I have completely given up on the mainstream media and the blind spot it has for hockey, and while it would have been nice to receive full-time employment, it is not surprising that Canadian sport journalism remains the same old same old. In March, 2004 I spoke at the first ever Canadian conference on women's hockey at St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. For this conference I re-visited some of the alleged gang rapes I covered in *Crossing the Line*. It had been six years since

I had spoken to the victims and I thought it would be important to find out how their lives had been in these years after Canadians had to acknowledge some of the dark secrets of our national sport.

These young women spoke of healing and of missed opportunities as athletes themselves. One was determined to make hockey safer and became a coach and administrator for girl's hockey. The paper can also be found on the Sports Intelligence Unit website. In May 2005, over a year later, I received a letter from the conference organizer and editor of the book, *Putting it on Ice*, which was a collection of the papers presented at this conference. "...Although your session at the conference had been one of the most engaging and provocative of the entire three days, the Publications Committee has recommended against publication. This decision was upheld at the GRI (Gorsebrook Research Institute) annual Board meeting last week; on the grounds that the paper did not deal with women's hockey per se, even though it addressed matters of sexuality and gender relations related to the game in Canada....I hope you will understand that this decision is not a reflection upon the quality of your work nor the nobility of your intentions..."...blah, blah, blah.

So there you go. Well at least working in a free-lance capacity does have advantages because the first part of that word—"free" as in "to be free" is most important to me. And not surprisingly, there has been much to write about. As I reported in 2002, the Canadian Hockey Association (now Canadian Hockey) and the Canadian Hockey League (CHL) formed policies on sexual harassment and abuse after the sex scandals of 1996-97. What they didn't do, however, and what the decision-makers at the women's hockey conference didn't do, was address the culture that creates the abuse of young males that is systemic to ice-hockey, and simultaneously creates a very anti-female culture (a rape

culture to use the term used in sport sociology) as opposed to one that embraces women and girls as athletes equal to men and boys.

But this culture of brutalizing young males and denying the very existence of young females—of “disappearing” them from the world of sport does not solely exist in Canada. In the seven years since *Crossing the Line* came out, and I have heard stories from around the world, I have seen how Canadian professional male hockey is really just the way in which an international and historic phenomena acts itself out in our large and cold country.

#### A Story That Must Be Told:

Before I address the main subject matter of this paper, which is the relationship between military abuse and intimidation and that found in sport, particularly through initiations, I want to look at a case in hockey that took even the most jaundiced by surprise in North America in 2004. In April, after the St. Louis Blues of the NHL had lost in a play-off in San Jose, California, Michael Danton was arrested and charged with conspiracy to murder. The FBI said he had tried to hire someone through a nineteen-yearold girlfriend to kill his former coach and present agent David Frost. Both were from Canada. Both to this day deny that Frost was the target.

The tale became stranger and stranger as evidence showed that as a coach Frost had corralled a group of five pre-puberty male players in Brampton, Ontario, a suburb of Toronto, and over a period of years successfully pulled them away from their families. In fact Mike Danton had started out as Michael Jefferson, but had turned on his family, saying they—particularly his father--were abusive and that he no longer considered himself related to them. In 2002 he legally changed his name to Danton.

The Jeffersons claim coach and agent David Frost was so psychologically manipulative

of the boys he coached that he convinced Danton of this. Others, whose children played against Frost's team remember his father as loud and obnoxious—a rather extreme hockey father—but not a physically abusive person. We still do not know the truth about Danton's childhood. But we do know that Frost moved his star players with him, took them from their families, and started a new team over two hundred kilometres from their homes. They either lived with him or he billeted them in houses, but billets still had to abide by his rules or he became uncontrollably angry. They were not allowed to socialize with others and had no life outside of hockey, as they were pulled out of school to compete, and meals were, for the most part, taken with him. Danton made it onto the junior Sarnia OHL team, and was now nearly three hundred kilometres from his home.

Neighbours remember loud and raucous parties held by Frost for the team and many girls arriving at his residency. He married the daughter of an NHL executive, and she has given birth to a child. To this day, though the media knows who this is, no mention of the family name in the press or on air has occurred. When the boys became old enough to be considered by the NHL, Frost applied for an agent license, and despite the fact he had been convicted on assault charges after beating up a player, he was granted that license. By then, Frost had plenty of close friends in the NHL administration.

Today Danton is behind bars in a Missouri prison after being convicted on conspiracy to murder. Frost still tried, until he was stopped by the authorities, to manipulate Danton and be his spokesperson. Frost has a hockey school in Los Angeles and employs some of the other players he coached as boys at the school. Rumours of Danton and Frost having a sexual relationship still exist, but no one has investigated whether or not the sexual relationship started while Danton was younger than the age of consent, if so this is a serious criminal offence. We do not know when Frost married the daughter of the NHL

executive, whether she was one of the many girls he invited to the parties for the players, and if Danton met her during one of those parties. We know for sure, however, that this is a terribly ugly story, but not a surprising one given the predatory and violent nature of junior hockey. Some day I hope the whole story will be told. For now though, I want to look at a much larger story.

### Shared Rape Cultures: The Military and Professional Male Team Sport

In the spring of 2004 the prison abuse scandal of Abu Ghraib in Iraq broke. Certainly the world was appalled and shocked by the nearly two thousand images of brutalized Iraqi prisoners, and by the smiling glee the American soldiers exhibited in not only sexually and physically brutalizing them, but the glee they displayed in the photos over their conquests.

At the same time, my colleagues Jay Johnson of the University of Toronto and Margery Holman, of the University of Windsor had just edited *Making the Team: Inside the World of Sport Initiations and Hazing*. (Canadian Scholar's Press, Toronto, 2004) when the brutal photos swept through the media. Greg Malszecki of York University in Toronto and myself had written chapters that focused on the similarities between sport and the military in the way in which "new recruits" are initiated. I felt compelled to explore this area partly because so many men who had survived their military experience spoke to me about the initiations they endured, and partly because I had been interested in the similarities since at least 1993. In his chapter, *No Mercy Shown Nor Asked: Toughness Test or Torture, Hazing in Military Combat Units and Its Collateral Damage*, Dr. Malszecki examines the history attached to this practice of proving masculinity through violence, humiliations and threats.

In 1993 I met a member of Canada's Airborne Division in the airport in Ottawa—our nation's capital. The Airborne were supposedly our elite military unit and had been sent to Mogadishu, Somalia as United Nations peacekeepers during the many years of that country's violent unrest.

He proudly told me horrifying stories of violence within the units, which included constant physical battles to prove masculinity and power. This theatre of maleness was always about one thing—finding the “feminine” in men and pounding it out. In his own words, when there were no women around, someone had to be the c---. I thought of this soldier often while I investigated stories of initiations in junior hockey that were alarmingly similar to what he had described.

Two years later in 1995, the Canadian Airborne scandal broke. It was two-fold. We saw videos of grotesque scatological rituals acted out within the ranks in racist ways against African-Canadian soldiers, and an overwhelming misogyny as the new recruits became the designated female—the one who had to be penetrated and degraded—just as the soldier I spoke with had described.

Worse still was what the regiment did in Somalia as they slowly tortured to death Shiddane Arone, a young Somalian boy. At the inquiry into his death later in Canada, Olad Abdulle Mohammad told the Canadian Somalia Association he heard Arone's cries from the field hospital in which he lay. “Guys don't undress me. I am a male. Keep your penis away from me, I am male” Olad Abdulle translated. He then testified “they started climbing on him from the rear like a woman.” This important information—that Arone may have been raped as well as tortured to death--was difficult to find. It certainly was not considered very important by the mainstream media. Perhaps it is a given in their minds that a bound and gagged boy would be raped by soldiers, but if this is the case,

then why is it a given? Is a crime not worth analyzing just because it is so common?

Two years after *Crossing the Line* came out I was sitting in a café in a Western Canadian town just as I was about to go skiing, and a man at the table across from me told me he had heard I had written a book about sexual abuse in hockey. I told him I believed coaches like Graham James, the sexual predator from the Swift Current Broncos, were rare, but that I was most worried about the initiations--hard-core sadomasochistic torture of boys that is premeditated and ritualistic.”

He didn't miss a beat. “I know” he replied, “I was in the American Marines.”

This behaviour is not hearsay, but the logical progression of an ideology that equates real men with violence. In contrast, everyone else must be violated or at the very least, be at risk of being violated, with those with power making this decision.

When the Abu Ghraib prison scandal broke Canadians had amnesia. We are excellent critics of the Americans and rather myopic about our own history in this area. Despite combing the news media for a significant period of time for stories on how these abuses mirrored, in a much larger way, our own, I only found one—an excellent article by Peter Cheney in *The Globe and Mail* on the Somalia/Airborne scandal. But no one seemed to notice the parallels between Abu Ghraib and our own sacred Canadian locker rooms.

Even the revered American journalist Seymour Hersh, who has so well investigated the American military for so many years, steers clear of asking why the torture in Abu Ghraib was centred around a rape culture, and why it ran parallel to initiations regularly held in American football teams and platoons. Could Hersh be completely unaware of how frequently these “games” are played out in America?

In his book *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (Harper-Collins, New York, 2004), he brushes over the prison scandal and what it really tells us about the

American military. He writes about the way in which Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney made it clear that they wanted American soldiers to “get tough” or “shake down” prisoners (pg. 4). He quotes the interrogator of John Walker Lindh, the young American who was captured in late 2001 in Afghanistan as a member of the Taliban, that “the Secretary of Defense’s counsel had authorized him to ‘take the gloves off’ and ask whatever he wanted.” (pg. 4) Taking off the gloves is hockey language for a down and out fight. Hersh also quotes soldiers who refer to the “hard site” where the prisoners considered most dangerous were jailed. First the soldier saw prisoners thrown in a pile. Later when he returned he says:

I saw two naked detainees, one masturbating to another kneeling with it mouth open. I thought I should just get out of there. I didn’t think it was right....I saw SSG Frederick walking towards me, and he said, ‘Look what these animals will do when you leave them alone for two seconds.’ I heard PFC England shout out, ‘He’s getting hard.’ (pg.23-24)

Hersh does not investigate why the soldiers have forced the prisoners into these endless acts of sexual degradation. What does this mean to the soldiers? How do they imagine maleness? And if their worst enemy is made into a fag/bitch, how do they imagine femaleness and homosexuality? There is also no attempt to link what happened in the prisons with what happened in the lives of the soldiers who committed the abuses. Hersh does postulate that sexual degradation had been used as a conscious weapon against the prisoners:

The notion that Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation had become a talking point among pro-war Washington conservatives in the month before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. One book that was

frequently cited was *The Arab Mind*...The book includes a twenty-five page chapter on Arabs and sex, depicting sex as a taboo vested in shame and repression...It was thought that some prisoners would do anything --including spying on their associates—to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends. (pg. 39)

I believe this to be the case, but sexual degradation acted out by hypermasculine groups against the “other” have a long history in North American military; it wasn’t something they dreamed up after reading about Islamic psychological weaknesses. Creating spies out of men who knew they had been photographed while being abused was surely only an excuse so the acts could be carried out. Even the not terribly intelligent American recruits knew they had, with very few exceptions, regular Iraqi citizens in their custody, not terrorists. There weren’t any associates worth spying on, and the prisoners were hardly people the Americans would trust in intelligence gathering. Hersh must have known that the chain of command knew this too, yet he didn’t ask the hard question—where did this rape culture come from? Why would nearly two thousand photographs and videos be shot of wretched abuse? Where does this extraordinary voyeurism come from in the military and elsewhere? One common thread in this sort of abuse is the way in which the perpetrator records its entirety. And if the soldiers and those up the command to the White House did honestly believe they had a prison full of terrorists, what kind of paranoia is necessary to believe this, and why has that paranoia been translated into acts of sexual assault?

While hockey has never had anything close to murder or the scale of the mountains of evidence of constant and grotesque abuse in the prisons, none of the “games” played by the American soldiers and military police with the prisoners were unfamiliar to me. I had

heard about all of them from junior and NHL players for years. The games were not just familiar; they were predictable in any group that defines masculinity through power, strength, and aggression. That at least one female soldier took part is also predictable. To prove you are one of the boys in this subculture, you must push the envelope of disgust even further than they would. This is why, when Canadian Air Borne members, who also held white supremacist beliefs in Somalia committed, torture and murder two of the worst perpetrators—Clayton Matchey and Kyle Brown--were First Nations.

I believe the brutal sadomasochistic acts perpetrated against Iraqis were not isolated incidents (a few bad apples as the American government or the Canadian hockey establishment like to say). Rather there is a deep relationship in the minds of those in the American military and the guardians of Canadian hockey between torture and sexual humiliation and rape and women. They either carry out these “games” or cover-up the carrying out of them because war and/or sport are spaces where they can exhibit masculinity and in order to do that, they must denigrate and intimidate “the enemy” through violence and rape. Men who understand masculinity in this way must always have an enemy, hence the forever expanding axis of evil, the ever expanding list of who might be a terrorist, and in hockey, the regular designation of first year players as temporary women, and players on other teams as those worthy of violent attacks.

How does one “dream up” putting women’s underwear on a naked man’s head and demand that he parade in front of group of armed soldiers, as we saw in released photos from Abu Ghraib? How does one “dream up” forcing boys to perform gross sexual acts as a team building exercise as is the case so often in junior hockey? These are not random acts.

In Canada in 2003, the Canadian Forces Base outside of Winnipeg was investigated

after soldiers who were suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome from duty in the Middle East, Kosovo, and Afghanistan tried to get help on the base. In the base's annual parade these men were depicted in women's clothing, and enclosed in pink cages on a float that had the initials "CT." This stands for "Crazy Train"—which is what going across the base to the psychiatrist's office was called. Of course CT also stands for cock tease. The depiction of these men in this way was okayed by the commanding officer of the base. In the highly misogynistic and homophobic cultures of Canadian Forces Bases and American military prisons, there is constant need to prove ones masculinity and to prove the weakness of others. A man who admits he needs help with his emotional reaction to war is of course, a woman or a fag. There is nothing weaker or more scorned in these cultures.

There is no conspiracy that allows the Canadian military and hockey world shares their little games with the American military or vice-versa. The most interesting part is that they will all act out this theatre of violence in isolation from one another, yet they will all be the same.

When I saw the photos from Abu Ghraib in May 2004 of stripped prisoners who had been forced to pile on top of one another as if they were having oral sex, it reminded me of the dozens of junior hockey players who told me about the sweatbox. This is the tiny washroom at the back of the bus in which the teams travel. It was de rigeur for all rookies to be stripped and forced in the sweatbox, only to be taken out one at a time for more abuse.

One player, who went on to the NHL, told me rookies had to walk down the bus aisle naked, with their hands behind their heads, while senior players could use any object they wanted—cassette cases, coat hangers, whatever—to beat their genitals. He said he was a

pretty quiet guy and wasn't beaten badly, but one player, who was considered rather mouthy was beaten until he bled. Meanwhile, the coach sat at the front of the bus and laughed. That coach is now in the NHL.

Forcing prisoners to strip and masturbate, forcing them to feign or perform sexual acts, take on the role of the penetrated or be designated, as hockey players like to say, their bitch for the week, and forcing them to submit to cruel and humiliating punishments—this is all part of Canadian junior hockey culture.

I wrote a piece for the Op Ed page of *The Globe and Mail* in May 2004 about the experiences shared by the prisoners in Abu Ghraib and first year junior hockey players. It was reprinted in the Sports Intelligence Unit website by Jens Sejer Andersen. While I privately received positive feedback, the Canadian media failed once again to see the cultural significance of this systemic behaviour. No one caught the pass and started to really investigate why this behaviour is so abhorrent and so predictable.

In the spring of 2004, I continued to read about the atrocities of Abu Ghraib--of a prisoner being sodomized with a chemical light and perhaps a broomstick, I thought of the countless numbers of junior players who had told me about the favorite instruments in hockey for sodomizing—a tube of heat liniment, a hockey stick or both. During the week the scandal broke, one man, very well known in Canada, disclosed to me abuse that occurred in hockey. He said it was the reason he dropped out at bantam age, and that it was clear to everyone that it was happening. He added that his son, who played on an American hockey scholarship, solved the problem of being the biggest, and hopefully the most feared so he would be left alone, by taking steroids. A couple of days later, a former junior hockey player approached me and told a similar story. The pressure on him at a junior hockey camp to “get bigger” which was code language for taking steroids, was so

intense, he quit and has never picked up a hockey stick again. He said there were always undercurrents threatening abuse if you didn't cooperate.

And so, despite Canadian Hockey's zero-tolerance policy, this theatre of violence is still acted out. On September 29, 2005, two players in the Windsor Spitfires—a CHL team—were suspended indefinitely after 18-year-old senior player Steve Downie cross-checked 16-year-old first year player Akim Aliu in the face during a team practice. Aliu lost three teeth and needed several stitches in his forehead. The Ontario Hockey League's president David Branch investigated. The police did not. In the Windsor Star's coverage of the incident, they write that Aliu, a minor, is “not contemplating criminal charges and Windsor police confirmed no complaint has been filed.” In Canadian law minors cannot press charges. The Windsor police know this as do the Windsor Spitfires. Charges must be laid on behalf of a minor by the police.

It is hard to imagine an assault occurring in front of many witnesses that knocks three teeth out and causes a wound that must be closed by stitches to be ignored so completely by police, but this is hockey. Not only did the police not lay charges, they did not even investigate. On October 18, it was the CHL who announced the results of their “investigation”. Once again we had an organization investigating itself. There were no critical comments from the sport media about a multi-million dollar company investigating an event that reflected badly on its reputation. Again neither the police nor any of the social services designed to protect children intervened.

To the CHL's and Ontario Hockey League's credit they did admit that an initiation had occurred on the team bus and that the coach of the team, former NHL player Moe Mantha had been present for the entire time. They didn't call the initiation sexually abusive, yet the young players were forced to strip and, as is the case for so many teams, were locked

into the tiny washroom at the back of the bus. Not surprisingly, this vague sketch was the only details released by the OHL, and the sports media did not pursue more details.

This was the first time the OHL had implemented its zero-tolerance policy on initiations that was put in place during the sex scandals of 1997, and again, to their credit they levied the maximum fines. Coach Mantha was suspended for forty games and disallowed to perform duties as a general manager for the entire season. The team was fined \$35,000.00 Canadian and an additional \$10,000.00 for the fight between Downie and Aliu. “We had serious concerns about the team’s leadership and the lack thereof regarding these issues,” David Branch, the president of the OHL said when he released the report. “We felt appropriate steps weren’t taken. We must send a clear message that we don’t condone hazing. We feel we took very significant steps to reinforce our values and principals.”

For some unknown reason Aliu, the victim, was at first suspended indefinitely and then suspended for one game. Who knows how or why the OHL came to this decision. He was also offered counseling. Downie, the perpetrator, is no longer with the team and has requested to be traded.

At the same time as the Spitfires scandal broke, McGill University’s varsity football team, the Redmen, were also being investigated for their initiation of first year players. This was particularly brutal with one player alleging he was stripped and sodomized with a broomstick. The same day the OHL announced the findings of their investigation, McGill University announced that they had cancelled the rest of McGill’s football season.

We should not use the word “hazing” to describe what these boys went through. Hazing can include scavenger hunts on campus or stupid, but relatively harmless pranks. This is

too soft of a word. What the Windsor Spitfires, the McGill Redmen, and countless other males sports teams do to first year players is criminal and thorough investigations should be done by the police and the social service organizations responsible for the well-being of young people. We cannot trust investigations done only by organizations—the university and the OHL—that have a vested and economic interest in the team.

At best senior players sexually exploited these boys in that they used their relative power to get them to sexually perform for them or be performed on. I am not talking about rape here—actual penetration (thought that does happen in initiations)—I am talking about behaviour of a sexual nature. As soon as boys are told they must strip for the team, they have moved into this area. There is no such thing as true consent when first year players know if they do not do what they are told, they will pay for their decision all season through dirty and nasty retaliations. At worst sexual assault offenses have been committed.

Unfortunately, despite the ban on “hazing” or more accurately, sado masochistic initiations in hockey and varsity sports, it will always secretly continue because the culture that creates it has not changed. In the complex and deeply denied mix of the homophobic/homoerotic activity that defines aggressive male sport teams, there has to be a designated woman/fag. The new boy(s) on the team are it.

So, while I applaud the sanctions of the OHL levied on the Spitfires and agree that the Redmen must be banned from the rest of this season—these measures are band-aids. The Canadian Hockey League collectively spends hundreds of millions of dollars promoting the boys and young men who are referred to as their best “commodity”. Let us not forget that this is a profit-making organization that buys, sells, and trades boys and young men for their physical prowess. Less skilled players are rewarded for their ability to fight and

intimidate. Junior hockey simply does not exist without coercion and violence.

It is important to understand that, by definition, this violence is male, and that people pay to see young men hurt one another. Yes, of course good hockey exists, but only with an overlay of violence, and all the little boys who idolize these teams learn a very particular lesson on what constitutes a real Canadian male. If and when they make the cut and join the junior ranks they have already had a life-time of understanding maleness through a violent lens. What a surprise then, that only rarely do the victims of initiations dare to speak out about what they have endured.

Normalization of violent male behaviour is further re-enforced by comments such as the one made by women's national team member Jayna Hefford when asked about the initiations. "If there's ever been any fun rookie stuff, it really stays at fun. Girls aren't as good at handling that sort of thing as guys are," said Hefford.

No one is "good at handling" sexual assault. Male players may be good at keeping what happened to them a secret, but the damage done to them comes out in dangerous ways—through alcoholism, drug-use, anti-social behaviour, and violence against themselves and others.

Zero tolerance policies and fines are important, but as long as hockey and football remain testing grounds for masculinity, masculinity tests will always be administered—they will just become more secretive. It may be re-assuring for Canadians to know that our national symbol is a hockey player and not a soldier, but whether a human being is a first year junior or a prisoner of war, there is little difference between hockey sticks and broomsticks.