

Lessons from Steubenville: An Interview with Jackson Katz: Part I

March 20, 2013 by Jeremy Earp

This past Sunday in Steubenville, Ohio, high school football stars Trent Mays and Ma'lik Richmond were convicted of raping an intoxicated and barely conscious 16-year-old girl. Author and cultural critic Jackson Katz talked about the implications of the case in this wide-ranging two-part interview with Media Education Foundation (MEF) Production Director Jeremy Earp.

Katz, a leading expert in the gender violence prevention field, co-founded the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program in 1993 at Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society. MVP's innovative "bystander" approach has since become mainstream practice in gender violence prevention education, and the MVP program itself has been implemented widely in college athletics, in all branches of the US military, the NFL, Major League Baseball, and in scores of other organizations, including many high schools and middle schools across the country, reaching beyond athletics to the general student population. In addition to his pioneering work with MVP, Katz is the author of *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women & How All Men Can Help* (2006) and *Leading Men: Presidential Campaigns & the Politics of Manhood* (2012). He is also the creator of MEF's bestselling film *Tough Guise: Violence, Media & the Crisis in Masculinity*.

JE: What was your immediate reaction to the verdict in the Steubenville rape case?

JK: I can't say I was very surprised by the verdict, but the entire case and the way it played out with convictions was unusual. First of all, a rape was reported, young men were charged with it, and they were convicted. That in itself makes this case atypical. I also think it's important to note that because this case was tried in juvenile court, the verdict was rendered by a judge; it's an open question whether a jury in an adult court would have reached the same conclusion. Then there's the added dimension that the perpetrators were high-profile members of a prominent football team in an Eastern Ohio town known for its "jockocracy," which made this a national story and gave the case greater cultural weight and significance. I also think it's notable that since one of the perpetrators was white and the other was African-American, the story didn't immediately become about race. I don't think there's any question that if both of the perpetrators had been African-American, the discussion around the case would have been very different, especially given the victim was white. Social media also played a role — both in the public discussion around the case, in Steubenville and around the country, and because there was actual evidence in the trial drawn from video from cell phones and text messaging and such.

Rape is a huge problem in the United States and around the world, and those of us who work in this field know that cases like this happen a lot more often than people think. But because of some of these media-friendly aspects, this case has tapped into the cultural zeitgeist in a way that most rapes don't. The fact is that most rapes are never even reported. And so this case gives us an opportunity to have a discussion about the dominant features of rape culture in ways that might help us prevent crimes like this from happening in the first place. In that way, even though this incident has been sad and tragic for everyone involved, this is a teachable moment.

JE: As you just pointed out, one of the big reasons this case has received so much attention is because the perpetrators were prominent members of the high school football team in a town where high school football is a big deal. In what ways do you think football culture might have shaped the town's response to this case — and also the media's coverage of it? CNN, in particular, has been drawing fire for showing excessive sympathy for the perpetrators in its reporting on the verdict Sunday.

JK: The first thing I'd say is it's not illegitimate to express concern about those boys. That doesn't in any way excuse their behavior, far from it — but there's a reason why they were tried in juvenile court. They're kids. And I hope they turn their lives around. All of that said, though, I do think the degree of sympathy shown for

the perpetrators speaks to a larger problem in mainstream media coverage of sexual assault cases generally. The fact is that media coverage of sexual assault tends to spend a lot less time establishing the basic humanity of the victims than it does looking at other aspects of the story. In this specific case, the media frame was all about how the perpetrators were young football players who were held in high esteem in the town and had the rest of their lives before them, that sort of thing. As a result, a lot of the coverage focused on what a conviction would mean for their futures, what the rape said about this town, what it said about the prominence of football in this town. And this carried through the coverage even after the conviction, as we saw on CNN.

Well, the net effect of all this has been to deflect attention away from the victim. The mainstream media haven't spent nearly as much time focusing on what this young woman went through that night, what she's been through since, what kind of a person she is, how this will affect *her* future. Then you add to that all the questions that inevitably arise in sexual assault cases about whether the victim was really a victim or whether she willingly participated in this, that kind of sexist stuff – which in turn plays into all the warped ideas and double standards we have as a culture about women's sexuality and men's sexuality – and this adds yet another layer that distances us from the this victim as a person. Part of this has to do with the need to protect the anonymity of the victim. But it also has to do with all these other ideas and norms that circulate in the culture about sex and gender and power and entitlement – and with the pivotal role mainstream media play in reinforcing these norms.

JE: Can you give another example of how the media coverage of this case has dehumanized – or at least distanced us from the humanity of – this young woman?

JK: Well, one thing I've seen is that a lot of the news coverage – even on the day the guilty verdict was rendered – has repeatedly used the word “accuser” to refer to the victim of this crime. And this isn't a new development; it's become common practice to use words like “accuser” to refer to victims in rape cases. One of the reasons this is so deeply problematic is that it turns the focus of the crime onto her — it shifts the sympathy of the public from seeing her as an alleged victim to seeing her as an alleged perpetrator of a false charge. It's an extremely regressive and disturbing media convention, and I think it shows how we conspire as a society to silence victims.

JE: What do you make of the football angle in this case, the media storyline that these were high school football stars being put on trial?

JK: The dominant storyline has emphasized football culture in Steubenville, Ohio, how the two young men who were convicted were star players, and how a lot of the people in the town tried to protect them for that reason. I think that's an interesting and important angle, and I appreciate the fact that it's the main reason this case was elevated to this level. But I also think there's a danger that the focus on football will distract us from the bigger picture here – which is that the problem of sexual violence goes way beyond the football culture in Steubenville, Ohio, and way beyond football culture generally. My fear is that a lot of people will scapegoat this one community, or this one jock subculture, rather than doing the tougher work of looking introspectively at the culture as a whole.

I think another thing that's bound to happen over the coming days, is that there's going to be very little discussion about prevention programs and leadership by coaches and athletic administrators. My sense is that the national discussion will focus much too narrowly on student-athletes, rather than on the larger system of values and the role of adult leaders within that subculture. Student-athletes are just symptoms of the problem. And unless and until we change the athletic subculture, the priorities of the leadership in that subculture, and the relationship of that subculture to the larger society, then we're likely to continue seeing these problems surfacing.

JE: I take it you're not holding your breath for mainstream media to give people this kind of wider cultural view of the case?

JK: No, I'm not. Based on their track record, and the dearth of real journalism in corporate media generally, I don't expect the mainstream media to do this kind of work. I think mainstream media do a really poor job drawing deeper analyses and making more sophisticated connections between cultural practices, sociological forces, and individual behavior. They're much more focused on the criminal justice system, the battle between prosecutors and defense attorneys, the legal steps taken and not taken, than on a broader cultural analysis. And over the years it's been the source of endless frustration for me and a lot of other people working in this field to see the media treat one high-profile sexual assault, domestic violence, and homicide case after another with a criminal justice focus that has overwhelmed any broader sociological or cultural examination of what's driving this epidemic of gender violence in the first place.

JE: How would a broader sociological or cultural analysis apply to the football angle in this case?

JK: I think one of the reasons why, initially, this case was covered up to a certain degree was because, like in so many of these situations, the perpetrators — or the “alleged perpetrators” at the time — had more social power than the victim. The fact that they were members of the football team was an important part of their social capital. And in a town where football is king and these guys are football players, there's an extent to which the town's identity is implicated in the behavior of the players.

There are some similarities to the infamous 1989 gang rape case in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, which was recounted in Bernard Lefkowitz's book *Our Guys*. The book details how prominent members of various sports teams, all of them white boys, perpetrated this planned and staged sexual assault against a mentally retarded girl. Some of the townspeople blamed the girl — who had the emotional and cognitive development of an eight-year-old — and attacked anybody who defended her because they saw it as an attack on “their guys.” The mentality was that “our guys wouldn't do something like that, she must have tempted them,” and so forth. It's an embarrassingly predictable response. And I think something similar went on in the Steubenville case, at least initially. There was clearly a lot of denial and defensiveness about the crime. A lot of people there didn't want to think their community, their football team, had produced rapists.

Cases like these are especially painful because they force a level of introspection on the part of the townspeople — including the parents of other players, the boosters of the football program, and the residents who come to games and celebrate their boys. It implicates all of them on some level, even though — and let's be clear — they're not the ones who perpetrated the crime. Nevertheless, I believe this incident *does* say something about Steubenville, about the football culture there. When people have an identity investment in denying what happened, the most logical course is to blame the victim. It's much easier — and a lot more self-interested, in many cases — to say that she was either making it up or exaggerating, to suggest it was really consensual, or to minimize it and say, “Well, you know, maybe it wasn't good behavior, but it wasn't criminal, just young guys being stupid and callous. Boys will be boys, after all.” All the predictable things you hear in defense of perpetrators in these kinds of cases.

JE: And in fact there were a lot of people in the town who were blaming the girl's supporters and the news media for blowing things out of proportion.

JK: That's classic. It happens in pro sports. When a popular professional athlete is charged with a sexual or domestic violence crime, the impulse — especially in the case of sex crimes — is to deny it ever happened, disbelieve the complaining witness, claim it was consensual, imply she had an ulterior motive (often money), or suggest she might have used the false rape allegation as an act of revenge. People often know in the depths of their conscience that something happened, but they refuse to accept that the guy they root for, their star player, would do something like this because it's too painful to admit and to acknowledge that, yes, he would do something like this. Because you cheer for him — your child might even have his poster on his/her bedroom wall! — you have an identity stake in his good behavior.

I realize some people reject this and say, “Well, they’re just athletes. We know that they’re not model citizens. And we cheer for them on the court.” I mean, after allegations of sexual assault against Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger a couple of years ago, the eminent sportswriter Frank Deford said, “At a certain point, don’t you just stop caring whether our athletes — who for some reason or other are always called ‘role models’ — don’t you just stop caring whether they behave? Don’t you just want to say, ‘Let the thugs play?’” Obviously I don’t agree with that. I think that’s a completely cynical view and I don’t share it. We should never simply forget these things and move on like nothing happened.

JE: When it became clear the victim in this case was going to cooperate with the prosecution, one of the convicted rapists sent text messages to her pleading with her to back off because he was going to be kicked off the team. My guess is that he wasn’t alone in making football the central concern.

JK: That’s right. Obviously he had a self-interest in squelching the case. But on a larger level I think this speaks to a real distortion of values. You have to wonder about the value system of a culture that places football and the events on the field higher than a young woman’s, or a young man’s, right not to be the victim of violence and humiliation. It’s a truly disfigured value system that defends football over a rape victim’s bodily integrity and humanity.

JE: I know you’re careful to broaden your analysis of sexism and cultural misogyny beyond sports culture, but do you think there’s something about sports culture – more than other societal subcultures – that may be working to reinforce regressive ideas and ideals that lead to sexual assaults like these? And within the sports culture, would you say there’s something about football culture, specifically, that we need to be looking at – given the inherent violence of the sport?

JK: I would see it as an indictment of the centrality of football and football culture in the larger society, rather than the specifics inherent in the sport of football. These kinds of incidents happen in cultures all over the world that don’t play American-style football. Take societies where soccer is the most important sport. Men who play soccer at elite levels are very popular, enjoy great privileges, get all kinds of breaks. Some of the dynamics of the male peer cultures where sports are played are very different — soccer and football are very different sports — but the social position of the athletes is similar. Generally speaking, young male athletes tend to get more attention from heterosexual girls and women, including sexual attention. There’s a certain sense of social privilege and license that’s implied and sometimes explicitly stated. You know, football players can get away with certain things and can act certain ways — their coach will make a phone call or people won’t pursue accountability for them because they have this elevated status.

So I don’t think it’s as much about the game itself as it is about the social position that being successful at that game or sport affords men. I don’t think you can dismiss the idea that football is a violent game, where brute strength and physical aggression are rewarded. But I do think that football players know the difference between the field — where they’re in between the white lines playing against a well-trained opponent with bright lights and referees — and a party or other social situation. I think they know the difference between using aggression in the context of sports, where it’s socially rewarded, and other contexts where it’s illegal. I wouldn’t dismiss out of hand any possible relationship between aggression and violence in sports and violence off the field. I think that would be naive. But I don’t think that’s the most important piece of it.

JE: Is the main issue for you, then, the sense of entitlement that comes from playing sports? Or are you equally concerned about the regressive masculine ideals that circulate and are glamorized within sports culture?

JK: I think a bigger question than “What is the role of the sports culture?” is “What is the role of culture in shaping norms of masculinity, femininity, sex and power?” And I’m also concerned about how race intersects with these other forces. The bottom line is that sports culture is a really important subculture that influences the larger culture, and is in turn influenced by the larger culture. But let’s be clear: this goes way beyond sports. Gang rapes, for example, are perpetrated all the time by men who don’t identify with the sports culture – they’re

in street gangs, motorcycle gangs, fraternities, in the military. It's not just about sports. The dynamics of male peer culture are implicated more than sports culture is implicated, and cultural misogyny is implicated in a more general way than the sports culture's misogyny. So it's important to emphasize that gang rape and group sexual assaults happen in all kinds of different contexts not involving athletes or student-athletes.

The most important questions, for me, center on why gang rape remains such a persistent problem in American society and around the world. What is the role of misogyny? What is the role of male socialization? What are the dynamics in hierarchical and non-hierarchical male peer cultures? What is the role of subcultural variation versus the larger culture's norms? Given the insanely high levels of gang rape around the world, we need to be asking these questions.

Bear in mind, also, that lots of incidents occur under the public radar screen. Take young men's sexual assault of other young men in various male organizations. Sexualized violence is often a feature of "hazing" rituals. It's not typically described as sexual violence – it's euphemized as a ritual or rite of passage – but forced penetration (digital or otherwise) of adolescent boys and young men by other boys and men is a disturbingly common feature in certain types of hazing rituals – especially in the sports culture and in parts of military culture. I'm not saying the Steubenville rape was part of a hazing ritual. I am saying that boys and men do this to each other, as well as to girls and women.

JE: What do you make of that? How do these rituals square with the rampant levels of homophobia we tend to see among guys in these hypermasculine heterosexual subcultures?

JK: The anthropologist Peggy Sanday wrote a book called *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood and Privilege on Campus*. Among the book's insights was that gang rape could be understood as a group sexual experience between men, who use women's bodies as a vehicle to symbolically have sex with each other. The woman has been completely depersonalized and dehumanized in that context. And I think this makes a lot of sense. In these gang rape situations, guys aren't thinking about her as a real person. You saw this in that infamous video released by the hacktivist group KnightSec that captured a Steubenville kid making fun of the rape the night it happened. He went on and on about "how raped she was" and "how dead she was." The most striking thing about it was how devoid his language was of any sense of the young woman as a human being – let alone a human being in a vulnerable position. In so many gang rapes, the woman (or man) is seen as an inanimate object. This is really about the group process between the guys. Another way to think about this is that they're performing a kind of manhood for themselves and for each other. The girl is just a prop in their theatrical performance.

JE: So in a lot of these cases it makes perfect sense to you that the women are treated like rag dolls, like inanimate objects. They tend to be drunk, passed out, not really there at all.

JK: Yes. And again, you can move this out of sports culture and talk about all these other gang rapes. They happen all over the world. I just read yesterday about the gang rape of a Swiss tourist in central India by a group of guys that weren't American high school football players in Ohio. Again, the questions we need to be asking have to do with the dynamics of male peer cultures that produce these gang rapes. We need to be thinking about the effects of misogynous attitudes and beliefs about women, and how many people who are not perpetrators nonetheless help to perpetuate those beliefs. These are very uncomfortable questions. A lot of people would much rather say it's bad parenting, or they're a pathological community that is obsessed with football. It's painful to think introspectively about who and what we've become as a society. And other cultures need to be similarly inward-looking.

At the same time, it's important to remember that the vast majority of men are not rapists. The vast majority of Steubenville football players are not rapists. I suspect that most of them are probably good guys. The dynamics in male peer culture, especially on teams and other close-knit groups, are powerful, and some young men do succumb to pressures, or do enact abusive behaviors. There's no excuse for that, but there's a difference

between trying to understand it and excusing it. I don't know the details here about how many guys were in the room or heard about what was going on in social media. But I guarantee you there were a number of young men on that football team who were part of this process in some fashion, who were not happy about it and did not approve of it, but didn't do anything to stop it.

This interview (Parts I and II) is located at www.mvpstrat.com.