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Mancave: Great Failures of Sports Culture

Matt Moreland

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Matt Moreland has created *Mancave: Great Failures of Sports Culture*, a room designed after those rooms devoted to male fandom, to illustrate how professional sports are not removed from ongoing social issues such as racism, homophobia, sexism, rape culture, violence, bullying, drug culture, and animal rights. Throughout the room, different aspects of how sports can embody the worst of these various issues are put on display, disrupting the intent of a man cave as a space that is closed off from the responsibilities and complexities of the outside world. Todd Bertuzzi's jersey is hung on the wall, but instead of the jersey representing a player who displays a great level of skill, it represents someone who has become notorious and infamous for brutally attacking and paralyzing opposing player Steve Moore during a game in March 2004. As well, notorious incidents of violence are projected on loop, such as a massive brawl that erupted during a basketball game between the Detroit Pistons and Indiana Pacers in November 2004, highlighting the brutality that is normally glossed over during games. In this way Moreland takes typical expressions of fandom and subverts them to highlight the ways in which sports enable discrimination, hatred and violence between the players involved. Moreland's installation disrupts the idea that the man cave is a place where a man can ignore the outside world and retreat into his own comfort zone. Moreland highlights how the environment that pro sports creates enables those within it to act in ways that seem hopelessly backwards, insensitive and even damaging to people, by encouraging everyone involved in the sport to conform to one singular, narrow idea of what a pro athlete should be. If someone doesn't live up to this unrealistic ideal, they are singled out, abused by their teammates and coaches, and criticized in public by the sports media. As Moreland demonstrates these actions don't exist in a vacuum, and they can tell us a lot about how damaging it can be to turn public figures into something larger than life, only to be quickly reminded just how human they actually are, and how far we still have to go to make progress in how we treat each other.

The influence that pro sports has on the greater culture can be trivialized at times, but there have been moments in history when athletes had an impact on our world beyond simply being good at what they do. Jackie Robinson broke the colour barrier for baseball in the major leagues in 1947, and in the process became one of the most public faces of the civil rights movement for African Americans. In 1973, tennis player Billie Jean King defeated Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of The Sexes," a match that was seen as a representation of the fight for women's rights.

These athletes became symbols for something greater than simply their skill in the field. In the present day, University of Missouri football player Michael Sam has publicly come out and depending on the results of the upcoming NFL Draft he may become the first openly gay player in NFL history. This is an especially important event because he is a football player, a sport that more than any other promotes their players as ultra-male warriors, paragons of classic manliness. Dallas sportscaster Dale Hansen took a stand for the inclusion of an openly gay player in pro football during a commentary that went viral on the Internet, by noting that players who have shown a stunning lack of humanity have been accepted into pro football, and yet a gay player is considered controversial. Hansen illustrated the hypocrisy by stating: "Players accused of rape and pay the woman to go away? You lie to police trying to cover up a murder? We're comfortable with that. You love another man? Well, now you've gone too far!" Serious moral transgressions are ignored as long as these men achieve certain qualities of being the masculine ideal of a football player, and whether a player is a good person becomes secondary to the image they present.

There are just as many, if not more, examples of situations where players and teams have committed acts that are examples of marginalization, ignorance, abuse and violence. The incredibly lucrative business of pro sports, and the status which sports enjoys in our culture, can have a blinding effect on the moral judgment of those involved. Hockey is a sport where aggression and physicality are encouraged, and the result are incidents of extreme violence such as Todd Bertuzzi driving Steve Moore headfirst into the ice, or Marty McSorley hitting Donald Brashear in the head with his stick. But it isn't just incidents during games that display how athletes can take advantage of the riches and fame they enjoy to do harm to others. Michael Vick was one of the NFL's most famous quarterbacks, playing for the Atlanta Falcons, when in July 2007 he was arrested for operating an illegal dog-fighting ring and served 23 months in jail after pleading guilty. Vick admitted to taking part in the torture and execution of the dogs that were forced to compete in these fights. Athletes such as Vick may feel a certain invincibility from the fame they enjoy that allows them to commit a heinous act such as this, and this feeling of immunity isn't exclusive to pro sports, it exists within amateur sports as well. In the summer of 2012, members of a high school football team in Steubenville Ohio were accused of, and subsequently convicted of raping a girl who went to the same school. In May of 2013, two teenage girls who also went to the school plead guilty to threatening the victim with threats of death over social media. Their comments were but a few from others in town who chose to attack the victim and side with the defendants, because their status as football players gave them a level of respect and admiration in the community they wouldn't have had otherwise. It is in this incident that we see how sports can blind not only those within the organizations, but the fans who watch on from outside as well. They forego critical thought, choosing instead to judge those they watch on the playing field solely on how they perform on the field, not how they act off of it.

According to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* we all begin life chained to the wall of a cave, like prisoners, seeing only the wall. We can only see the shadows of the objects that exist outside the cave, not the objects themselves. It is only once we leave the cave that we can see that the objects we assume to be reality were actually just shadows cast by the sun. Plato argues that

those who escape the cave are obligated to return and share their new knowledge with those still chained. A typical man cave resembles the beginning of Plato's allegory, with the fan choosing to imprison himself in his room, viewing what he assumes to be reality through the game he watches on TV. But this game is only a shadow of reality, not containing the vast number of experiences of many different kinds of people, with different goals, hopes and dreams. Moreland's *Mancave* represents a kind of return to the cave, after gaining knowledge of the outside world, and then informing those still within the cave about this new knowledge. For Moreland, the more that the outside world can influence the world of sports, and influence the actions of the people who participate in it, the better the reflection that will be given back to us.

- Anthony Smith



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