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OPINION

editorials, letters, commentary and perspective

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Recent lies hurt future victims

■ **OUR OPINION:** A former stripper's claims of rape further tip the scales of sexual assault

In the wake of accusations by a 23-year-old woman that Dallas Cowboy Erik Williams raped her while teammate Michael Irvin held a gun to her head, it's easy to jump to conclusions.

Many columnists and sportswriters across the country determined the football players guilty before any charges had been filed. And as far as making conclusions, the *Emerald* was no different.

An editorial was originally planned discussing, in no small part, how professional and collegiate athletes need to recognize their "mortality." The Irvin/Williams situation was to be used as an example in the argument. And while we still believe athletes (and the people who watch them) need to be conscious of their role in society, the fact that we wanted to incorporate an incident in which no charges had even been filed proves we were caught up in the same web of deceit that many others fell victim to.

The accuser, former topless dancer Nina Shahravan, irreversibly damaged a variety of people with her false claims. After police cleared Irvin and Williams on Jan. 10, Irvin's lawyer, Royce West, told the Associated Press that Shahravan's precedent may stir other women to make "some fast money" by capitalizing on celebrities' fame.

But Shahravan hurt a lot more than just athletes' reputations and future safety against criminal accusers. In fact, she may have strengthened the safety net that athletes and those in the public eye already have.

Most damaging and most important is Shahravan's effect on the credibility of future victims of sexual assault. As we have said before, accusing someone of rape or assault is always difficult, no matter how legitimate the claim. Genuine victims of sexual assault often become additional victims — of public scrutiny or shame — when it is their as-

sailants who rightfully should be faced with these problems.

Shahravan's cruel hoax skewed a playing field that was already hopelessly out of balance. Serious questions will appear whenever a famous person is accused of sexual assault, and to a lesser degree, when anyone is accused. As West said, the accusers may be looking for "fast money" but more importantly, they may be telling the truth.

In the case of athletes vs. their accusers, athletes can handle the criticism and the doubts behind their innocence. With money and power on their side, athletes (if falsely accused) can surely uncover the truth. The accusers, on the other hand, cannot afford such serious questions about their legitimacy.

Of course, athletes do bad things — sometimes, terrible things. On July 15 of last year, Irvin himself pleaded no contest to second-degree felony cocaine possession in exchange for four years deferred probation. Indeed, Irvin's history was the main reason why the accusations against him were so overblown.

But Irvin didn't deserve the treatment he received from the media, public and Shahravan herself. It was unfortunate Dallas police felt the need to hold a press conference to announce the accusations and in turn, fan the flames of Shahravan's story.

Shahravan's accusations, like all potential sexual assault, deserved to be investigated — but not in the public eye. Because of the treatment her story was given, she was given credibility without earning it. And when her accusations were deemed false, the damage was already done.

The public and the media are to blame for accepting Shahravan's story, but she is guilty of creating it. And because of her duplicity, everyone from athletes to accusers will feel the hurt for years to come. But after weaving through the truth and the lies, it is the victims who are punished the most — and deserve it the least.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board.



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

THE DRAWING BOARD



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