

TRIGGER WARNING: COLLEGE FOOTBALL

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Late in her book, "Unsportsmanlike Conduct: College Football and the Politics of Rape" (Edge of Sports/Akashic Books), Jessica Luther tells the story of former University of Missouri football player Rolandis Woodland, who, in January 2014, talked to ESPN's "Outside the Lines" about confronting three of his teammates over a gang rape they allegedly committed in 2010.

"We should celebrate Woodland for being willing to put the safety of others over football," Luther writes.

That such a statement doesn't seem self-evident is the reason "Unsportsmanlike Conduct" exists. College football has always sold itself as being about the high ideals of higher education, but sexual violence has become a mirror in which the sport, fueled by lucrative television contracts,

insanely passionate fans and wealthy donors, puts itself before everything else: education, the well-being of women and, often, its own student-athletes.

Luther has been on the college football/sexual assault beat ("it's not a fun place to hang out," she writes in the book's press kit) for such publications as Sports Illustrated, Texas Monthly and Vice Sports since 2013, which is also when Jameis Winston, the quarterback for her own beloved alma mater, Florida State, became the sport's most prominent alleged assailant. But "Unsportsmanlike Conduct" is not about Winston; nor is it a history of the 100-plus incidents since 1974 that Luther uncovered in her research, nearly half which involved multiple players.

Instead, the book is structured as a "playbook," with Luther outlining "The Playbook As It Is" (with chapter titles such as "Nothing to See Here," "The Shrug" and "Moving On") in the book's first section, and "How It Could Be" in the second part.

"I was very interested in the narratives that we talk about all the time, instead of actually talking about the things we should be," Luther said. She spoke to Street Roots via phone from Austin, Texas.

Jason Cohen: *It has to be exhausting, obviously, covering this beat. Even just reading these stories, you feel sad and outraged, but nothing comes next. It seems like you wanted to focus on that with this book.*

Jessica Luther: Yeah that's definitely true. I was adamant that there be a section where I at least attempted to suggest solutions, because otherwise it does feel defeatist. Even if the things that are suggested in the book are just the beginnings to fixing an incredibly large problem.

J.C.: *In your introduction, you actually provide definitions of sexual assault, consent, rape, and rape culture. What do you think people don't understand about the latter term?*

J.L.: Well, people get scared of the word "rape" to begin with. And then when you attach it to "culture," they immediately feel implicated in it, which I don't feel bad about. But I think that's sort of where the struggle is. It's not an individual thing. People internalize it because a lot of us participate in it. This kind of minimization of sexual violence, of okaying it. That it's never really that big of a deal. That's just all around us, all the time.

And it's a spectrum, which I think is maybe one of the most difficult things about it. It's certainly about actual violence, but it's also *any* nonconsensual stuff: not respecting boundaries when a woman says no to you in any capacity in your life. "Oh, well, she didn't really mean that, right?" That becomes a joke, and then you can't see it for the problem that it actually is. That's sort of how it gets embedded in our culture.

J.C.: *And in sports, part of that culture is just casual everyday misogyny.*

J.L.: Yeah, football in particular is such a

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good lens for this, because it's so hyper-masculine. It's also very violent. Masculine violence that we all are excited about. There's this idea that you're good at it because you're not a girl. I was reading about an assistant coach of some sort, who, like, screamed at the guys about not being "pussies." That's how you get them to work harder, is to tell them they are acting like a girl, and that's the last thing that they want to be.

J.C.: *But football also tells us that it makes better men. That's the romance of the coach.*

J.L.: We LOVE them. We make movies about this. One of my favorite TV shows ever ("Friday Night Lights") is about a coach who is a good influence on these guys, and he gets so much credit for that.

But then as soon as something bad happens, we all shift into, "Oh well, this is an individual guy doing an individual thing and a coach can't keep up with a hundred and whatever players. This has nothing to do with the culture of the locker room. This has nothing to do with football." And I hate that. It just doesn't feel fair that one of those things is true and one isn't.

I do have that idealistic idea of sports being able to teach people things. Discipline, teamwork, rooting for other people, selflessness, those kind of things. I feel like that can happen. But it's also encouraging you, in football's case, to be violent, and often to be sexist and homophobic. Those things are also there. We should just be talking about all of it. I feel like I'm always advocating for a better,

Jessica Luther's book addresses sexual assault and rape culture in the game she still can't help but (mostly) love