

LUTHER, from page 4

bigger conversation, instead of the really skewed, happy sports conversation that we tend to have.

J.C.: *College football is part of a corporate capitalist machine. So with most of these cases, you see a pattern of boosters, the media and even law enforcement giving players and coaches special treatment.*



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Jessica Luther

J.L.: Yes. It's money. And one thing I've been stressing in talking about the book is, yes, it's a lot about how (schools) don't care about people who report this kind of violence. They don't care about the violence, they don't care about that harm. But they also don't care about the *players*. You know, like maybe a coach on some sort of an individual level has a relationship with these guys. But there's a system to protect them so that they can stay on the

field so everyone can keep making money. When I talk about my own struggles to watch football now, of course (the sexual violence problem) is a big reason for that. But also I have a hard time watching them hit each other, knowing what they're doing to their bodies and their brains, knowing that the school's not paying them to do that, knowing that, especially for black players, they're not (all) going to get the promised degree: the very thing that we're told is the reason that they should be sacrificing their minds and bodies. The whole system is very difficult for me to watch or participate in any more.

J.C.: *As a Florida State fan, where were you emotionally when they won the national championship in January 2014?*

J.L.: I was really conflicted. I remember feeling both really happy that they won and also really shitty that the person that had led them down this field was possibly a rapist. The best word is ambivalence. And that sucked. I was upset that I couldn't just be happy for my football team.

J.C.: *We learned a lot more about the accusations against Jameis Winston the following season, even though he was ultimately not charged with anything. When Florida State lost to Oregon in the 2015 College Football Playoff, some of the Ducks players chanted "No means no," which a lot of people found trivializing.*

J.L.: I do think it trivializes. Using the fact that one school is bad at handling responses to sexual assault as a way to mock another sports team is, on its face, something I don't like. When fans suddenly care about this issue because a team they hate is dealing with it, that just makes me sick. But at the same time, I know survivors who appreciate those moments.

J.C.: *You write about what you call "The Minimizer," the fact that the media tends to gloss over how bad some of these incidents are compared to what's in the police reports.*

J.L.: I always suggest that people read those things before they start talking about (accusations). We so rarely accurately discuss the violence that's been reported. And sometimes the violence is damn shocking. As soon as I say that, cases start popping up in my head. It's incredible that people are doing this kind of harm to other people, and that anyone is minimizing it, or trying to talk it away.

J.C.: *You say in the book we're having a "cultural moment." Obviously in some ways you wish that wasn't the case, but does it feel like awareness is increasing every day?*

J.L.: It definitely feels like that. One of the easy critiques of the book is, "Well, it's not just in college football." Yeah, it is definitely not just in college football! We are talking about it on campuses generally, we're talking about it in high schools, we're talking about it at the professional level of sports, and we're talking about it in entertainment, the tech world, the business world. We're just having quite the conversation right now as a society around harassment and sexual violence. It's hard to say in the moment how different it is, but I'm hopeful.

I feel like (the case of the Stanford swimmer) Brock Turner had a big effect. People in my life who don't normally care about these things were affected by (the victim's impact statement). She did such a good job of talking about the things that I think we need to be better about. Talking about trauma, (post-traumatic stress disorder) and consent. One of the things I struggle with is the idea that, once the legal stuff is done for the athletes, then it's time to move on. We're done here! And for the victims, that is almost never true. Sometimes years later, they still have effects from the violence that they experienced and, often, from the betrayal of the institutions that they thought were going to help them.

And so it feels like we're talking about this in a better way. And that makes me happy.

J.C.: *The story you and Dan Solomon wrote for Texas Monthly in August 2015 was the first of several investigations that ultimately got Baylor University head coach Art Briles fired, with president Ken Starr and athletic director Ian McCaw also leaving. But all of Briles' assistant coaches are still there. Do you still feel OK about that, as far as whether or not it's a real culture change?*

J.L.: I do. What Baylor did was a big deal. I don't know how far those ripples will go up outside of Waco, but their holding the highest people at the university accountable for the systemic failure is important, and does matter. And it was such a high-profile football team and a high-profile coach,

so that gives me hope too.

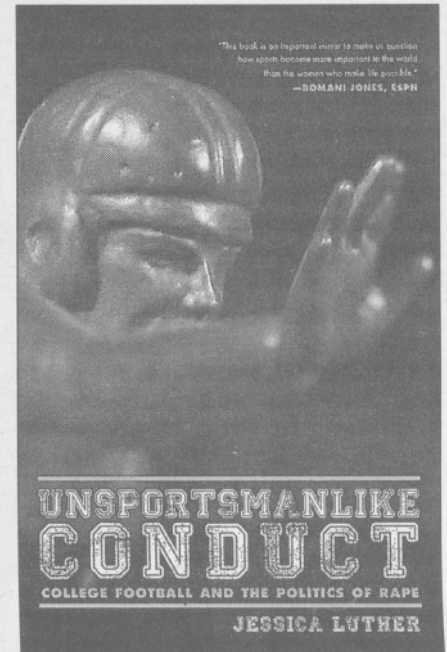
I don't need coaches to have, like, massive internal feeling shifts about victims and survivors. If they're just scared they're going to lose their job, so they do a better job of not creating a culture that's going to harm people, I'm cool with that. I don't really care what's in their heart.

J.C.: *What do you think the average college football fan can do to try to make the world a better place, if you will?*

J.L.: Well, they could care about this issue. People just don't. They care about it so much in theory, and then when you really want to address it, and you want to criticize people for it, then they're like, "Whoa whoa whoa – that's too much." I have a chapter about fandom, and when I originally wrote the draft, it was one sentence long. It just said, "Fans need to calm down." And my editor was like, "Let's do a little bit more."

But fans really have to interrogate themselves about their own emotional reaction to these teams. And I can't stress enough how much I understand how hard that is, because I still struggle with it. Even now.

I also think if you do actually care about this issue, you have to be vocal about it. People ask me if fans – and I'm always asked specifically about "women fans," which is an annoying question – should boycott football. But I think change is much more useful from the inside. You can call your Board of Regents. You can voice your dissent. You can take that emotional energy that you've built up, that you use to yell at reporters, and redirect it back at the institution that you say you love so much. It's OK to be critical of the thing you love. If you really do love your school, you should be asking more of it.



"Unsportsmanlike Conduct: College Football and the Politics of Rape" by Jessica Luther

