

“This is something that I think about a lot: being a rape survivor and having to watch tens of thousands of people cheer for the people who hurt you.

I don't know that a lot of people understand what that feels like. I do, and I know other survivors that do.

Brenda Tracy, rape survivor and advocate for changing the culture of violence in sports



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Brenda Tracy stands on the Michigan sideline with head football coach Jim Harbaugh during the Sept. 8 game against Western Michigan. Harbaugh made Tracy honorary captain after she spoke to the team about her #SetTheExpectation campaign to combat rape culture.

Setting the expectation for college athletes

Brenda Tracy is working to combat rape culture in sports

BY JASON COHEN
STAFF WRITER

The president. The Supreme Court. Hollywood. Journalism. Restaurants. Comedy. No aspect of American life has been untouched by sexual assault, sexual harassment and #MeToo, including the world of college sports.

It seems impossible to get through a season without some kind of scandal – the repeated incidents at Baylor University under former football coach Art Briles, Michigan State's enabling of USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar, Ohio State football coach Urban Meyer's mishandling of domestic violence allegations against one of his now-former assistants.

But against that backdrop, college football players, fans and coaches have been having a conversation about sexual assault, rape and toxic masculinity for longer than some other workplaces and cultures, and for several years before #MeToo. A big reason for that is Brenda Tracy.

In 1998, when she was 24, Tracy was gang-raped by four men, including two Oregon

State University football players, in a Corvallis apartment. The case never went to trial, and the Beavers players were suspended from the team for just one game, with then-OSU head coach Mike Riley saying they made a “bad choice.” Tracy lived with that trauma – the shame, the fear, the anger, the public second-guessing of her, the anonymous victim, rather than her rapists – for 16 years. At her lowest moments, she considered suicide. But she also raised two sons, began a career as a registered nurse in Portland and got an MBA.

Then, in 2014, she went public with her experience in an interview with Oregonian sports columnist John Canzano, and began speaking to football coaches and their players – starting with a penitent Mike Riley, then at the University of Nebraska – about sexual assault, rape culture and consent. She now tells her story as a full-time job, working with universities, educating student-athletes, lobbying both the Oregon Legislature and the NCAA for reforms, and asking fans, coaches and teams alike to #SetTheExpectation: a pledge to stand up

against sexism and violence against women. She's now nationally famous, but it's also a demanding gig, with constant travel and awful online critics, to say nothing of the emotional toll taken by constantly reliving her own rape while also hearing the stories of other survivors.

“I literally live in this dark world of rape and sexual violence, 24/7,” Tracy said. But two decades after that night in Corvallis, she also said she wouldn't take it back, as it has brought her to her current life and purpose. “Somebody has to be out there talking about survivors, and that's my job: to make sure you don't forget about us.”

Jason Cohen: We've spoken several times over the past six months, and there is always some new incident or new development. When the news broke of how Ohio State coach Urban Meyer handled – or didn't handle – the domestic violence allegations against one of his assistants, a lot of people thought he was done.

Brenda Tracy: I thought it was

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