

NFL brings violence and abuse into our living rooms

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Recent video of a prominent football player punching his fiancée in an elevator has moved beyond the sports pages to take over mainstream North American conversation.

Ray Rice dragging his partner out of the elevator just moments after he knocked her to the ground offers stunning visual images of interpersonal violence and abuse. Just like most relationship abuse, this incident happened behind closed doors. But it was caught-on-tape in a way that our media can watch and re-watch, comment and dissect.

This Sunday, the debate shifted to child abuse as Minnesota Vikings star Adrian Peterson prepares to go to court for the charge of negligent injury of a child after whooping his child with a stick.

TV talk show hosts and burly football analysts, almost exclusively men, filled our homes with their opinions. They condemned Ray Rice and his situation, without really talking about what they experienced in their own playing days or behind their own closed doors.

Sports loves a good statistic, but none of the talking heads mentioned domestic abuse numbers. One in four women are abused in Canada and the United States. This means that on a football roster with 60 players, 15 of those men have been perpetrators of abuse.

"I think it brings a lot of light to domestic violence, not just Ray Rice but domestic violence as a whole, because it's not just a football or player issue, it's an issue, period," said NFL Hall of Famer Michael Strahan on David Letterman last week.

These sports experts were tiptoeing with more skill than a star running back in his prime, choosing the least offensive sound bite without committing too far in any direction.

Not surprisingly, Mike Ditka, former Chicago Bears head coach, scored low in the final analysis, "I don't know Ray at all," Ditka said. "I'm sure he's not a bad guy, but he made a bad mistake.

"Hey, two lives are ruined," Ditka said of Rice and his wife. "These two lives are ruined. His earning power is destroyed. That's an important thing."

Former basketball player and now announcer Charles Barkley supported Peterson beating his four-year-old child.

"We spank kids in the South. There's a question if Adrian Peterson went overboard, but listen Jim, we all grow up in different environments. Every black parent in my neighborhood in the South would be in trouble, or in jail, under those circumstances."

Whatever the opinions, the water cooler buzz has been dominated by domestic violence.

For those on the sidelines of this story, working to prevent interpersonal violence, that's the upside to a bad situation. Big men are talking about domestic violence. They are showing deep disapproval of something that's happening in every community. Men are telling men that hitting women is not acceptable. During a football game.

A new trend in the prevention of domestic violence is called 'Man Up Against Violence'. It's men leading the charge, demanding more of each other, challenging themselves as a gender to stop violence against women.

Last year, players from the B.C. Lions gave presentations as part of a campaign called 'Be More Than a Bystander', designed to change the culture among men so that abusive attitudes and behaviour directed toward women is not tolerated.

"The best way to do that is to use manly things," said O-lineman Angus Reid. "There's nothing more manly than football and it's a job of exclusively men."

At the University of Regina, organizers have planned a three-day event in late October to promote '[Man Up Against Violence](http://www.manupagainstviolence.ca)' awareness among young men. There will be a variety of guest speakers and lectures, panel discussions, a screening of Tough Guise 2: Violence, Manhood and American Culture. The website is www.manupagainstviolence.ca

Despite some early fumbles in the discussion surrounding violence and abuse in the NFL, those in the fight to prevent interpersonal violence and abuse welcome football fans and macho men to continue the conversation.

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