

“Good Kids” and “Modern Day Gladiators”: Hegemonic Masculinity in Small Town  
High School Football

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**Abstract:** Historically, contract sports have been used to promote a certain kind of masculinity. Sociologists have also studied the ways that sport impacts social capital. My analysis utilized both participant observation and interviews to examine the links between masculinity, high school football, and social capital at four small white working class high schools in rural Ohio. Interview and observation data, in conjunction with an extensive literature review, revealed that these communities rallied around football, and utilized Friday night football games to parade communal pride, norms, and values. Second, football games revealed a community praise for traditional masculinity, exemplified by strength and aggression over all other kinds of masculinity, reinforced by the social capital that surrounds football in the communities. Lastly, coaches acted as influential socializers, training their players to not only win football games, but to become men that the community can be proud of, future “husbands, workers, and fathers.”

## “Good Kids” and “Modern Day Gladiators”: Hegemonic Masculinity in Small Town High School Football

In the sociology of sport, much of the literature focuses on the way that athletics promote “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 2001). Hegemonic Masculinity refers to the cultural ideal of masculinity that is most valued by society with ties to traditional masculine norms of aggression, self-reliance, aggressiveness and strength. Michael Messner, arguably the foremost scholar on issues pertaining to the intersection of sports and masculinity, reasons that sport exists as a way for men to impose hegemonic masculinity; as sports are one of the last arenas where a male’s physical size, strength, and aggression can be used to assert power over others with few social repercussions (Messner 1992). Football in particular is a sport that is exclusively a male world that lauds aggression, violence, and self-sacrifice. Football presents a masculinity that is hetero-normative and narrow. While high school football definitely promotes hegemonic masculinity, it is also a socialization process that aims to turn boys into men that explicitly reflect and reinforce communal values of masculinity.

Sport is one of the institutions frequently studied in academic discussions of social capital (Davis 2005). One study of social capital and professional sports illustrates that sports have the ability to bring individuals and families together by fostering a sense of obligation, ownership, and stake-holding (Jarvie 2003). High school sports programs have also shown the ability to encourage teamwork and cooperative norms, arguably enhancing social capital and social behaviors (McNeal 2001). These two studies exemplify a glaring gap in the sociological literature; a majority of the studies, when looking at the intersections between community, social capital, and sport focus on

professional sports teams ( e.g. Jarvie 2003), not high school athletics. Furthermore, if high school sports are studied, much of the literature focuses on the impact of athletic culture on individuals rather than communities( e.g. Foley 1994, Mcneal 2001). Based on these two sets of literature, in many high schools, football is utilized both as a way to socialize boys into men as well as an important component of community social capital.

By studying high school football, utilizing both participant observation and in depth interviews, I aimed to answer two research questions: How does the hetero-normative image of masculinity presented by football culture impact the formation of masculinity among high school males? How do the values espoused by high school football reflect the masculine norms valued by the larger society? High school football games in small communities in rural Ohio provided copious amounts of data, and I was able to link sociological scholarship that focuses on community social capital and sport, with sociological scholarship that focuses on the intersection of sports and masculinity. My data and analysis reveal that it takes a community to build a successful football program, and that a successful football program, independent of wins and loses, creates future male community members that adhere to, and deeply believe in, community norms of masculinity.

### SOCIAL CAPTIAL THEORY

Falk and Kilpatrick (2000: 83) begin with the obvious question about social capital: “What is it...how can it be described and measured?” Woolock (1998: 155) defines social capital very broadly, as “encompassing the norms and networks facilitating collective action for mutual benefit”. The paper’s focus lies not in defining social capital, but in describing the potential for social capital to bring about social change. Portes (1998

p. 7) offers a very helpful definition, relating the concept of social capital to more concrete ideas: “Whereas economic capital is inside people’s bank accounts and human capital is in their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships”.

In the last 20 years, social capital theory has been dominated by two theorists, Putnam and Coleman. Coleman (1988) defines social capital as a “resource embodied in the relations among persons and positions that facilitates action.” He identified three kinds of social capital; the obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures, information channels, and social norms. Davis (2005: 2) summarizes Coleman’s definition of social capital as “the strength of relationships within an individual’s sphere of influence that provides order and opportunities that those without those relationships may not have”. Putnam (2000) broadened the definition of social capital. On page 36 of *Bowling Alone*, he defines it as “features of social organization, such as networks norms, trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for benefit”.

*Bowling Alone* goes on to present the decay and erosion of social capital in the United States as a threat to personal and civic values -- the level of social capital within a community may reflect the health of its values. If social capital is strong, the values, social norms, and institutions of the community are strong. Cited in Davis, (Bouoth, Crouter, Sampson, 2001), on page 9 explain “it follows that communities high in social capital are better able to realize common values and maintain social controls”. In an extensive review of social capital theory, Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) further define social capital in terms of macro, meso and micro level forces. They define the macro level as society, the meso level as communities and organizations, and micro level as individuals. All three levels interact to create a full picture of social capital. Thinking about social

capital as an interactive process, where social, community and individual factors interact was very helpful for my analysis.

For my project I utilized the broad definition of social capital proposed by Coleman (1988) and expanded upon by Putnam (2000). I also included Jarvie's theory (2003) and Langbein and Bess' (2002) findings in my approach. Social capital mediates the relationships between individuals, between an individual and institutions, and an individual and larger social pressures. Bourdieu, in *the Forms of Capital*, as quoted by Portes, A. (1998), views social capital as instrument, and focuses on the advantages of obtaining social capital. I argue that in order to obtain social capital, an individual needs to internalize and reflect that communal norms and values of their surroundings. In this paper then, social capital is advantageous and built specifically by playing high school football. While social capital is important, understanding the process by which it is acquired will reveal the relationship between social capital, high school football, and community.

### HIGH SCHOOL SPORT AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Putnam in *Bowling Alone* (2000) posits that communities have weakened and culture is on a decline. In Britain, sport has been utilized in policies that aim for social inclusion and community regeneration (Jarvie 2003). Grant Jarvie (2003) studied the relationship between a community, town, and a local football team. Jarvie (2003: 152), concludes that "Scottish sport cannot sustain social capital on its own but it can make a valuable contribution to communitarianism and a reinvigorated sense of civic engagement in Scotland." Choosing "civic engagement" immediately implicates Putnam's well known analysis in *Bowling Alone*. Jarvie makes a tempered argument for

community building through sport as a counter to Putnam's bleak picture of modern social capital.

Jarvie's theory, although important, cannot be automatically deemed appropriate for my project, as the study took place in Scotland and was about professional sports. My analysis will focus on the impact of high school football on communities and social norms, rather than solely the school environment itself. However, the underlying idea, that the relationship between sports and communities contributes to social capital, is central to my analysis. Langbein and Bess (2002) utilize social capital theory to frame the impact of high school sports programs on participants. Langbein and Bess find that high school athletic involvement improves the level of social capital, which can be used to predict pro-social and co-operative behavior. While this finding is significant, it only looks at the impact of athletics on the social capital at the individual and school level. Foley, in his book, *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Tejas* (1994) completes an extensive case study of high school life, with a chapter entitled "The Great American Football Ritual". This chapter presents a ingenious analysis of the masculine socialization associated with football. Foley finds tensions in the competing expectations placed on football players. The community wants them to be "good" kids, with a strong moral compass, while their peers encourage them to engage in more deviant activities. While social capital is central to my study, the relationship between sports and hegemonic masculinity also warrants a theoretical approach.

## SPORT AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

### *Historical Context*

Michael Messner, in his book, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*, provides wonderful historical context. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the British developed sports in their public schools to teach boys how to “administer the Empire” (Messner 1992: 9). Team sports, because they emphasized dominance as well as subordination to leaders, were seen as a first step in military training for the British. The British used sports to teach a kind of “manliness” in order to dominate colonized peoples. The British utilized structure to make sport into a socialization tool in order to further colonialism.

Similar to Britain, sport in the United States originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the aim of “building character.” Institutions surrounding sport denied access to blue collar workers and people of color. However, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sports were a widespread recreational activity and utilized as a means to integrate immigrants into capitalist society. Elites viewed the extension of sports as a means of control, while marginalized groups learned to utilize sport as a means for social mobility and self expression in an increasingly structured society. Athletes who broke the color barrier in American society illustrate the power of sport to both enforce social order and allow for the order to be challenged. Even today, sport is an area where racial and class conflicts are visible. Today, African Americans dominate football and basketball the two most successful and popular American professional sports. Racism in sports still exists, however especially institutionally. Out of 119 division 1A collegiate football coaches only four are African American. This year, there was controversy when Auburn hired a

relatively unsuccessful white coach over Turner Gill, who had proven himself as one of the best young black coaches in college football in 2008, leading Buffalo University to their first MAC championship in 15 years. A writer for ESPN.com, reported to outside the lines (an ESPN program), that two Southeastern Conference coaches told him that Gill was not hired because of his race, more specifically because he is married to a white woman. This exemplifies institutional racism. Arguably Gill was not hired because of race even though he was the most exciting and qualified coaching candidate. One can assume that the decision to hire a white coach may have been made specifically to avoid a backlash, illustrating a powerful racism not only in the decision making body, but in the followers of Auburn football. The decision assumes that the fans and supporters of Auburn would not tolerate a black football coach, or a coach that is involved in an interracial relationship. When placed within a historical context, however issues of race in sports today are much more covert and institutional rather than overt. Moreover, the fact that ESPN as well as other major media sources reprimanded and viewed Auburn's actions as racist exemplifies a growing intolerance for overt racism in our society. It is important to place the relations between gender and sport in a historical context as well.

The industrial revolution, where the United States transitioned from a farm and small business economy to a potent, industrialized, and capitalist society had a significant impact on gender relations. Increasingly, men spent significantly more time out of the home with family life and work life existing as two distinct spheres. Men were spending less time with their families, and women, not men, were raising boys in both public schools and in the home (Messner 1992). Physical strength was less relevant to work than ever before. The shift from a male labor force which physically owned their production to

a labor force that was factory based, specialized, and less secure, coupled with boys being raised primarily by women created fears that males were become soft, or feminized (Messner 1992).

In response, men responded by forming groups such as Boy Scouts of America, where manliness could be taught in an institutionalized way. The rise of organized sport during this time period also can be attributed as a response to fears of the feminization of society. Fears of feminization cannot solely be attributed to changes in the organization of men's work. There were also cultural and political changes among women themselves, the concept of a "New Woman" emerged. She was a woman who was single, educated, and financially independent. This concept challenged the gender order even further. The formation of organized sport then, has to be understood in its historical context, arising as a social institution which was aimed to masculinate society, combating changes to the existing gender order. The history of organized sport relates directly to my research question. The history illustrates how the institution of organized sport has been used as a socialization tool, as a way to pass on gendered values to a new generation of males. The values taught through sport, especially contact sport, have been inextricably linked with hegemonic masculinity. Sport aimed to prepare boys for future military careers while simultaneously combating fears of the "feminization" of society. Contemporary High school football, cannot be removed from this historical context. Schooling is still used to socialize boys into men, and sports today are just as important of a socialization tool as ever before.

## COMBINING GENDER THEORY AND THE HISTORY OF SPORT

Feminist scholarship of sport focuses on the way that sport as an institution that is male dominated and leads to the subordination of women. While this is a valid place to start, I agree with Messner that “it is overly simplistic to view sport as simply a patriarchal institution that reinforces men’s power of women” (Messner 1992: 17). Based on the historical perspective, it is important to understand how the institution of sport promotes inequality among males. While it appears that historical analysis and feminist scholarship are at odds, utilizing Connells theory of “Gender Order” it is possible to connect the two. Connell (1987: 253) argues that, while men do benefit from the oppression of women, there are also competing masculinities at any point in history:

“The scope of gender relations is historically variable, and their power to determine cultural processes must be variable too. But a more limited strategic claim might be right. There are likely to be historical moments where the possibilities of general change in consciousness and culture depend more crucially on the dynamic of gender relations than on any other social force. It can be argued that we are in such a moment now.”

According to Connell, the dominant form of masculinity today is hegemonic and it is defined in its relation to, and oppressions of, marginalized (e.g. black) and stigmatized (e.g., homosexual) masculinities.

By combining the historical perspective with the concept of the “gender order”, sports in late 19<sup>th</sup> century American society, defined the gender order by “differentiating men from women and higher-status men from lower status men” (Messner 1992: 18). In the later twentieth century, racial, ethnic, poor and working class men participated in sport in increasing numbers (Messner 1992). Through later decades, sport continued to be an activity that turned boys into men.

The passage of title IX in 1972, illustrates social recognition that sport is indeed an institution that furthers gender inequality. Simply exploring gender inequality in sport, however misses the inequality that the social institution of sport creates between competing masculinities. American football in particular illustrates the power of institutionalized sport to promote and reward hegemonic masculinity and criticize competing masculine norms. Messner, in his article entitled “The Televised Sports Manhood Formula” (2000), examines sports media. Based on a content analysis, he found themes in both sports programming and commercials that directly promote the ideals of a hegemonic masculinity, such as playing through pain and equating sports to war. Michael Kimmel in his article, “Masculinity as Homophobia” (1990), defines hegemonic masculinity as “a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power. We equate manhood with being strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control.” (Kimmel 1997: 223). Psychologist Robert Brannon (1976), as quoted in Kimmel (1997) summarizes hegemonic masculinity into four distinct phrases: “No Sissy Stuff”, “Be a Big Wheel”, “Be a Sturdy Oak”, “Give em Hell” (Kimmel 1997: 229). The game of football, and the culture that surrounds football exemplifies these ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

There is extensive literature on the definition of social capital, the building of social capital through sport, as well as literature that focus on the relation of sports to masculinity. In order to fully answer my research questions, to understand why high school football is so important to small rural towns in Ohio, I had to combine these three sets of literature. While all of the research has been completed in separate spheres, it is impossible to understand sports and masculinity without understanding the social capital

that comes from playing high school sport. Moreover, it is essential that you put these sets of literature within a historical perspective. The literature reveals high school football is central to lives of these small communities for a myriad of reasons that can only begin to be explored when the sets of literature are combined. By combining the sets of literature one begins to understand the links between football, community, and masculinity.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Participant Observation*

Participant observation allowed me to get a sense of the community. Friday night football games are first and foremost community gatherings, prayers are said, announcements are made, and friendship and kinship are shared between participants. Understanding interactions and the atmosphere for each game was central for my project. Participant observation was completed at three games. I attended one game in Centerburg, one game in East Knox, and one game in Danville. I saw the Danville team play at all three of the games. At each game, I took a small notebook and sat in the stands. I always tried to sit in the stands next to adult males who seemed to be focused on the game. I was also very often surrounded by young children, although I did not actively seek families out. Throughout the game I would take notice of interactions between the fans, the players, and try to get a sense of the “football culture”. I noted what fans were wearing, the state of the facilities, the banners, and flyers around the field. I took note of the organization of the event as well as what options whether it be food or entertainment were available. I attempted to be an unbiased observer. I do have a moderate knowledge of the rules and culture surrounding football, however I have only been to a handful of

football games in my life. I played flag football in middle school, but my high school did not offer a football team. Many of my ideas about high school football come from media portrayals, such as “Varsity Blues” or the television show “Friday Night Lights”.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

I interviewed coaches and players from the schools where I attended the games. All of the players I interviewed were over 18 years of age, they were either seniors or recent graduates. I had an interview schedule for coaches that focused on what football means to the communities where they coach, and also what kinds of values they tried to impart to their players. The players interview questions focused on describing their football experiences, what they learned from playing football, and links between football and their identity. The identity of each interview participant was protected and I used pseudonyms both in my note taking and transcription.

### *Demographics of Knox County*

Knox County, Ohio has 58,000 people according to the 2006 census. It is a rural community where manufacturing and farming are the largest industries. The median house hold income, according to 2004 census data is \$42,157. 16.7% of residents have bachelors degrees or higher. Knox county, according to the 2004 census is 97% Caucasian. There are two colleges in the county, Mt. Vernon Nazarene and Kenyon College. Mt. Vernon is the center of Knox County, with a population of 15, 950 according to the 2006 census. Based on this data, we can classify Knox County, OH as a rural, white working class area.

### *Central Ohio Mid-Buckeye Conference*

The three schools where I completed interviews and participant observation were members of the Central Ohio Mid-Buckeye Conference. The conference is made up of seven schools, Centerburg, East Knox, Danville, Johnstown-Monroe, Fredricktown, Northridge, and Utica. All of the schools in the Mid-Buckeye conference have total high school enrollments of fewer than 500 and are located in rural communities, with similar economic profiles.

### *East Knox High School*

I attended a game at East Knox high school in Howard, Ohio. As of 2007 Howard's population is 6,538. At East Knox High School there is an average expenditure of \$7,458 per student with student to teacher ratio of 16 to 1. Their expenditure breakdown matches with the Ohio state average. Like Knox County the school is 97% white.

### *Danville High School*

Danville High School is located in Danville, OH. It is a mere 3 miles from East Knox high school. Danville's population is 1,084, and at Danville High School there is an expenditure of \$4,897 per student. There are only 164 students total at the High School, with fifteen teachers.

*Centerburg High School*

Centerburg has a population of 1,486<sup>1</sup>, and at Centerburg High School there is spending of \$4,173 per student. There are 403 students at the school and 98.8% of students graduate.<sup>2</sup>

**“WE ARE DANVILLE, DANVILLE FOOTBALL”, COMMUNITY AND FOOTBALL**

I interviewed one of the coaches a week after his team had lost their final game in a losing season. Sitting in his classroom, I faced a man who knew the game of football. Behind him slogans and pictures of his team were up on the wall, after the interview he made sure to show me his new sport psychology tests that he was administering to his players. He had played football all his life, and coached at the high school and collegiate level. He took a twenty year hiatus from football only to return to coach and teach English in rural Ohio.

There was an instant sense of rapport with Coach K, and although he was approaching his mid 60s, he had the energy and passion of a much younger man. He still had the football build and although he hadn't played in decades, I still had difficulty discerning his neck from his shoulders. I asked him how you build a successful high school football program, and his response was curt, astute, and sociological: “You need to build a football culture”. He continued,

“He [The coach] has to work at it all the time. Communication is a key---the players, parents and community must know what is expected and that is what the standards are. He [The Coach] must be in the middle school and the youth

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<sup>1</sup> All demographic data is from [www.bestplaces.net](http://www.bestplaces.net), and from 2004 and 2006 census data.

<sup>2</sup> All school data is from [www.alleducationdata.com](http://www.alleducationdata.com), based on monthly reports collected by the National Center for Education Statistics.

program—those coaches and players must see him and believe in him if a culture is going to be developed.”

The concept of a “football culture” is really just the institutionalization of community norms and values through football. Football must permeate all aspects of growing up male in the community. The parents and coaches must be on the same page, must all understand the importance of football and value what playing football teaches. In order to create a winning football program, the coach needs to define the “standards” and values associated with football, not only on the team, but in the community at large. A successful team requires not only a coach that enforces standards and values, but a community that believes in those values and standards. Coleman (1998) defines social capital as obligations, trustworthiness, and expectations of structures, information channels, and social norms. In a successful “football culture” football underlies the obligations, trustworthiness and expectations of structures, information channels, and social norms of the community. A community with a strong football culture utilizes the sport as a tangible definition of social capital.

At one of the games I sat in front of a mother with a young son and daughter. In the course of the game, a player made an extremely athletic play on a punt return, running the kick back close to 40 yards. From behind I hear the male child shout, “I want to do that when I’m older!”, the mother then responded, “Yeah! Do you think you want to tackle or run fast when you are a little older?”, the boy then responded, “Both!” This appears to be a normal conversation, but when you put it in the context of social capital, the mother is encouraging her son to play football when he is older not only because he expresses a desire, but because football will bring both her and her son high levels of social capital within the community. This conversation is a great example of the process

of instilling cultural norms. As a young child, it is hard not to be excited by the atmosphere of the football game. This excitement then translates into a desire to be like the players, to play the game. Finally, both individuals and the community as a whole then nurture this excitement and another generation of high school football players are successfully created. The football culture of the community is a powerful force, central to community cohesion, and in Durkheim's words, social solidarity. A perfect example of the power of a football culture was at the Danville games.

In the stands at the Danville game a cheer rang out more than a few times. Whether the team had made a good play, or a bad one, it was clear that the community was behind their team: "We are Danville, Danville Football". Between the band and the football team there are at least 65 kids on the field, and only 165 in the entire school. At the game, the stands are teeming with people, although the school has only 165 kids there are at least 700 people on the sidelines. "Danville football" is everywhere; in the form of sweatshirts, t-shirts, hats, seat cushions, baby-bibs, and painted on middle school girls' faces. The community has an incredible sense of pride surrounding its football team. A player explains:

"People take a lot of pride in our football team, parts of our community, some people don't have a lot. A lot of their greatest moments and memories in their lives come from high school football, and they take a lot of pride in what they did and what they accomplished and they want that to continue" - QB

At first glance, this quote may appear to be about self esteem. However, I believe that it is more about communal pride and exemplifies the way that sports positively influences "communitarianism" (Jarvie, 2003). As a central facet of the community, sport creates a common ground where the community can define themselves and their

moral and social norms. Friday night high school football games are a distinct community event, and may reflect that communal values and definitions are healthy.

“it’s definitely a community thing. You were at the game, the entire community is there all of those people you know have some connection to the football team at some point in their life. As stupid as it sounds, it’s your typical small town movie football, everyone in the community is there.” – QB

One way that the school involves the community is by honoring football and band alumni. The first game I went to was homecoming. At half time, they made a special point of honoring the 1951 team, the first team to ever play in a homecoming game. The captain of the team, now in his seventies, stood and waved to the crowd. After acknowledging the 1951 first homecoming team, alumni were encouraged to join the current student band on the field to play the high school fight song. The ages ranged from recent alumni to elderly participants. There was one woman who played flute with the alumni band that stood next to her husband who is played trumpet, next to them, their son played clarinet. During half time, certain community members are encouraged to become part of the entertainment, celebration, and visible parading of communal norms and values. Even beyond the sport, connections to the activities that surround the team extend the entire lifespan. The community makes a point of making this life long connection visible utilizing nostalgia and tradition.

At another game, members of the undefeated 1988 team are honored at half time. Now middle aged, all 12 stand on the field with grins on their faces. They wave to the crowd as their names are read through the PA system. Social rewards gained through football do not end in high school, if successful, they are honored for life. By honoring winning and successful teams, the community also aims to create a winning football

culture, where success is normalized, expected, demanded, and rewarded. In this way high school football is used as a way to keep community members connected throughout the entirety of their lives. The pageantry of the games literally puts the talent of the town on display.

At the local watering hole in Danville, where I conducted one of my interviews, high school photos, football helmets, and banners are on display. I walked in the door after my interviewee and he was immediately noticed. The bartender gave him a big smile, and two patrons at the bar, facing a Danville football helmet, waived him a hello. We took a table by the back and I began to ask him questions. In the forty minutes that elapsed, five different people had come up to my interviewee and he made small talk. I asked him about recognition, and you could see the pride on his face when he told me that sometimes, although they knew him by name, he didn't know who his fans were: "You just have to smile and nod."

#### "THESE ARE OUR MODERN DAY GLADIATORS"

While high school football in these small rural communities positively influences social capital by allowing for a visible and tangible definition of social values and norms, it perpetuates a culture of hegemonic masculinity deeply rooted within the community. I sat in the stands, surrounded by middle aged men with a distinct focus on the game. The game is tied, and there is tension in the air. The quarterback slings the ball over the middle and it is caught by a receiver, but just as he catches the ball, the safety comes flying using leverage and momentum to smack the receiver while he is still in the air. He goes down hard, and the crowd erupts. "He held on to the ball! Man he got smashed! That'll wake ya right up!".

There is just a short fence surrounding the field, maybe three feet high. During the games there is a group of young boys, maybe between six and nine years old that run up and down the side of the field with a football, tackling each other with all of their might. They punch, they kick, and roll around in the grass gripping their football for dear life. They are surrounded by adults who, through their passiveness, encourage this aggression and full speed rough housing. At times, it was difficult for me to focus on the game, because I was convinced that one of the boys would end up in the fence. Juxtaposed with the violent hit that occurs, and the reaction in the stands, it is clear that encouragement of toughness, playing through pain, and aggression begins early.

In one of my interviews, a player made it clear that before games, “you just want to go out and kill somebody, man”. High school football promotes a culture that distinctly values a hegemonic masculinity, equating football to war, training kids to want to “kill” their enemies. Playing through pain and toughness is another huge aspect of the masculinity promoted by football, showing any kind of weakness is frowned upon and physical sacrifice is always necessary. A player that I interviewed played an entire season with a broken wrist, even though playing could have meant permanent damage. So the question then becomes, why sacrifice so much? Why go through the pain? One answer seems to lie in the social rewards one gets for playing football: Life long bonds, recognition, attention, but perhaps most importantly the community views you as a “good kid.” A boy who is transforming into a man, who fits with the masculine norms of the community. As a player, not only do you gain social rewards, but you get to foster pride in your fellow community members:

“When we play it means something. Some schools when their football program

isn't great nobody cares, but when you have the entire community there to watch, and you know that it's going to make or break the rest of their week, till that next game. I don't know I'm getting chills just sitting here thinking about it. There is just so much history and tradition and pride in the program" – QB

One coach I interviewed had a particular focus on morality, seeing kids as "good". What does it mean to be a "good" kid? When asked a coach about what good mean, he was clear that "good" meant being an example:

"Everyone needs to learn about doing the right thing, that's what I really try to stress. I want my kids to look at me as an example of how you should live, to be a class person, to do the right thing."

The right thing, and the good thing, are directly related to playing football. Playing football then is the norm in these communities. While football transmits accepted hegemonic masculinity, it does so under the guise of a moral sensibility. This directly relates to Foley's study of high school life in Texas, where football players need to balance to different sets of expectations. The coaches and community value them as positive role models, and "good" kids while their peers expect them to deviate from the norm in order to show that they are "cool".

There is a distinct morality and value attached to the hegemonic masculinity lauded in football. Modern day gladiators is an exceptional parallel to draw, as while these kids are literally playing with enough aggression to kill or seriously injure an opponent, there is a nobility and sense of virtue that comes with the physical sacrifice. Part of the nobility and virtue associated with gladiators, comes from the fact that they self sacrifice for some greater cause. As stated in the previous section, the community is their cause. While physical sacrifice is a lauded in football culture generally, it takes on another level of nobility when it is associated with community, or team sacrifice. The QB I interviewed

made very clear that community pride was one of the main motivators in his football career, that winning or losing could “make or break someone’s week”.

The annual “Devil Dog” game is a huge event in both the Danville and Howard communities and a perfect example of communal reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity. The “Devil Dog” game combines the names of both mascots, the Danville Blue Devils and the East Knox Bulldogs. The schools are rivals, both with exceptional football programs and strong football cultures. The schools are also separated by five mere miles, meaning that community members from both schools can attend the game. As I walk into the game, I was overwhelmed by the number of people crammed into the bleachers on either side of the field. After passing the banner for the undefeated 1988 state champion team, I see a group of 30 students with signs, body paint, and megaphones right under the goal post. Two males have painted the upper half of their bodies in East Knox purple and white, and during the game they will run in front of the stands, jumping up and down and shouting, trying to liven the crowd. As I walk in, two middle aged women are also selling devil dog game t-shirts, which have a picture of a bulldog and a blue devil both fighting over a football. In the center of the football on the t-shirt, there is an Under Armour logo. Under Armour is the fastest growing sport apparel brand. They are well known for their breakthrough advertising campaign that skyrocketed them to national prominence which equates sports to war and focuses on male muscularity. The commercial features fifteen extremely muscular men screaming as they lift weights in the weight room before a game. At the end of the commercial they all huddle together and scream, “we will protect this house!”. The slogan, “we will protect this house” has been co-opted by athletes everywhere to express the importance of protecting their home field

and turf, akin to a battle cry.

In my observations, Under Armour is extremely popular among players and young male spectators alike. At one of the games, the smallest player on the field has an Under Armour head cap on, two Under Armour bicep sweatbands, and Under Armour socks. It is apparel that makes a distinct statement about hegemonic masculinity, aggression, and playing tough, strong, and without mercy. The video recap on the Mt. Vernon news website of the Devil Dog game begins with a voice over of what is presumably one of the teams shouting, “we will protect this house!”

#### COACHES AS INFLUENTIAL SOCIALIZERS

While high school football in these communities does promote a hegemonic masculinity, it is veiled by the responsibility, maturity, and social bonds created through the game. In one interview, a player made it clear that football had made him “grow up”, one coach even proposed that “playing football teaches you how to be a man.” One interviewee recited advice his coach gave him that he still utilizes to this day:

“Whether you think you can or whether you think you can’t, you’re right. It’s about mental state and being confident, if you think you can, you can. If you think you can’t, you’re right. It has helped me prepare myself for games, playing here, and being confident in myself and knowing that I can get the job done.” - QB

The football coaches I interviewed saw themselves as shapers of young men, with specific lessons to teach.

“They learn how to be good people, follow rules, respect others, how to work as a team and how to be responsible workers, husbands, and fathers. I don’t think anything teaches more about life than football.”

While this coach frames these lessons in a football context, he is actually utilizing football to not only mold successful players, but mold moral, functioning members of the community that represent a specific set of hetero-normative masculine values. These coaches feel obligated to teach their players about life, and apply football values to these kids current and future lives. This also correlates with the history of sport and its military connections. As explained in my literature review, sports, especially in Britain were used as a way to train future military leaders. We see the same sort of character building and masculine training in this coaches comments.

Utilizing football to teach a certain kind of masculinity is a widely accepted and researched idea. However, in these rural communities, where the social capital surrounding football is extremely high, the power of a coach as a socializer reaches extremely high level. The coaches' values, and the masculine norms that surround football, reflect the masculine norms and values of the community. In this way, coaches are not molding men that they think will be successful, but molding men in a way that the community supports through the use of social capital.

## DISCUSSION

### *Answering Research Questions*

The hetero-normative image of masculinity presented by football culture significantly impacts the formation of masculinity of high school males. They are socialized to fit into hetero-normative masculinity by a football and community culture which values hegemonic masculinity. Through football and community social capital these kids are trained to be modern day gladiators, playing through pain with guts and toughness. They are rewarded with social capital in the form of community respect and

life long friendships. Much of the community respect stems from a notion that partly because they play football, they are “good kids”. In some sense, the term “good kid” refers to the way in which, by playing football, these kids fit in with the hetero-normative masculine stereotype presented by the community. Moreover, the term good attaches a moral connotation to football; they exemplify what is good and right, the ideals and norms of the surrounding community.

Many of these values also may be tied to class, more specifically white working class values. Lamont, in her work, *The Dignity of Working Men*, aims to understand the world of working class people, both in France and in the United States. She focuses on the workers, “collective identity” (page 11). She argues that American Workers see the world in a moral order and place extreme emphasis on being hardworking and responsible. According to Lamont, workers:

“Value hard work because it is their exclusive source of welfare and means for upward mobility. Their neighborhood and workplace leave them little buffering space from others. By working hard and being responsible, they hope to be able to maintain order in an environment that they perceive to be increasingly threatened by economic restructuring, criminality, and social decay...the centrality of work for these men is also reinforced by cultural repertoires concerning the meaning of masculinity and by repertoires provided by Protestantism and by American republican culture that make citizenship conditional on self-sufficiency and production”

Based on Lamont’s research there are significant overlaps between football values and working class values. Football values espouse hard work, teamwork, and personal sacrifice as central to success. In the same way, working class values center around issues of responsibility and hard work to maintain order in a changing world. Football then, when framed within the working class value structure, helps to maintain the social order and communal norms of these small working class communities. Football is a comfort, an

acknowledgement of the past, present and future of the town: “We are Danville, Danville Football”, can be seen as a rallying cry for a town in a changing world; no matter how much the world changes, there will be football games in Danville on Friday nights, and they will be the centerpiece of their community, because football teaches boys how to become upstanding and moral men. The process of utilizing football to turn boys into men, backed by the social capital of the community, keeps the existing moral order intact. Many things have changed since the 1950s in small town America, but football will be around as long as these towns want to define and maintain their moral and social order.

While much of my analysis deals with community influences, certain aspects of football culture represent larger social issues. Valuing a hegemonic masculinity, while it may be more intense in some communities than others, dominates the social construction of masculinity across our society. The advertising campaign of Under Armour and the televised sports manhood formula illustrate both the pervasiveness and marketability of hegemonic masculinity. It is unclear whether the social value of a hegemonic masculinity is greater than it has been historically. It is not an easy task to determine the social gender order at any given time. The social institution of sport is extremely powerful in male socialization and in the creation of social capital. There are many positive aspects of sport, however, especially on the individual level. Sport participation can be a very positive experience for many, and is an institution that brings issues of race, class, and gender to the forefront. However, in these small rural communities, largely because of the centrality of football, it is clear that hegemonic masculinity is valued over all other gender orders.

## CONCLUSION

Since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, institutionalized sport has been used to socialize males, to teach a form a masculinity that values power, aggression, and toughness. It is still used in this capacity to this day. Coaches are influential socializes and teach boys how to act as responsible men, with certain football values acting as the framework for “growing up”. In the small rural working class communities where I carried out my study, high school football had a significant amount of social capital; the norms, values, and expectations of the community were visibly reflected at these football games. The combination of social capital and masculine socialization lessons from dedicated coaches ended up creating players who not only value hegemonic masculinity, but future community members who understand and believe in the masculine expectations of the community at large. For these communities, who because of their strong social capital maintained by the social institution of high school football, creating masculinity is about more than nurturing athletic talent or brute strength, it is also about morality and doing the right thing; football is about creating football players who will also be successful “workers, husbands, and fathers”. High school football helps to maintain the moral fiber of these small working class communities, parading hetero-normative values every Friday night, constructing another generation of high school footballers with every game under the lights.

### *Further Research*

This study links high school football, community social capital, and the socialization of hegemonic masculinity. Further research should attempt to understand

positive and negative consequences of communities, institutions, and individuals coming together to promote a specific facet of masculinity. Further research should also compare rural, suburban, and urban areas and how location, framed in theory of high school football and social capital, may impact masculinity formation. Research which compares high school football with a greater focus on race and class should also be undertaken. I would like to have interviewed more coaches, parents and players. I also would have liked to interview students who avoided the football culture, the “outcasts” to further understand the power of the football culture and what happens when you deviate from the normative values of a community.

## Appendix 1

### Interview Schedule for Coaches

Interview Schedule for High School Coaches:

Background Information/ Football History:

1. Where he played high school football
2. Where he played college football
3. How he got into coaching
4. How he became the coach at school

Do you enjoy coaching at your high school?

Are you happy with the team, school, and facilities?

What values do you wish to impart to your players?

Is coaching about more than football?

What do you want you players to learn?

What do you think football teaches you about being a man?

Are your kids good role models for young boys?

What are some football values?

Are football values important to learn at a very young age?

Should every male play football?

If a student does not play sports, how do they learn about what it means to be a man?

Would you want your son to play high school football? Why or why not?

What is the role of football in the community?

How important is winning to the community?

Why do you think football games have become a community social event?

What is the role of football in the school?

Which students go to the game? Which students do not?

How important is winning? To the school? To the community?

## Appendix 2

### Interview Schedule for Players

#### Background Information: Football History

1. Age he began playing football
2. Why he started playing football
3. Who were his first coaches who encouraged him to play

#### Why did you play football in high school?

Was there pressure to play, from parents or friends?

What is your favorite football moment, football game, football play?

How large a role did football play in your high school life?

#### What do you think football teaches you about being a man?

Do you have children? If so, do they/did they play football?

Did you want them to play? Why or why not?

Some argue that sports, and football in particular teaches boys to become men, do you think this is true? If so, why?

#### What was the role of football in your high school?

Were you more popular because you played football?

Were guys who didn't play sports or football seen as weird, or treated differently by other kids in school?

As a guy, how do you make friends or become popular if you don't play sports?

Who goes to the football games? Why do you think they go?

#### What is the role of football in the community?

How important do you think football is to your community?

What did it feel like to take the field on Friday night?

Do you think kids today feel differently?

Why do you think so many different people go to the football games, of all different ages?

Do you think that your community respects male athletes more than guys who don't play sports?

Why do you think that is?

#### How much of your identity is tied to football?

How does that make you feel?

Would you rather be known for doing something else?

If you could do high school all over again would you still play? Why or why not?

### Appendix 3

#### Field Note 3: Devil Dog Game, First Half.

East Knox and Danville are rivals. The two schools are five miles apart from each other. I heard about the rivalry when I was completing interviews this summer. I passed Apple Valley and arrived at the game 10 minutes before kickoff. There were cars parked all around East Knox High school, and on 36. I followed the signs to further parking and was directed to a field behind the high school where I parked. I made my way down from my car to the field. I surveyed the surroundings, the place was buzzing with energy, I could hear the cheers coming from the field as I got closer. I bought my ticket. On the wall of the school next to the ticket booth there was a huge sign, wishing the bulldogs luck, in purple paint with purple paw prints on it as well. There was also a sign welcoming the 1988 championship team.

I walked from the ticket booth and was accosted by mothers selling baked goods, t-shirts and programs for the game. I politely declined and then a group of extremely enthusiastic students caught my eye. They were clustered under the goalpost closest to the entrance, with signs, face paint. Two of the boys were shirtless, chests and backs painted purple with the east Knox logo. One has a cross painted in between his shoulder blades. The fans also had cowbells. I made my way to the stands, where I decided to sit at the 40 yard line with older alumni, mostly male. As I sat down the men were discussing the players by name, had an intricate knowledge of the season and the talent (or lack of it) on the field.

The first play of the game, there is a huge hit on the kickoff. The east Knox player causes a fumble. The stands erupt with shouts and cheers. The focus of the conversation is still on the players and the season. Critiquing of each individual play. I am in direct sight of the cheerleading squad, who has about 15 cheerleaders, more than any of the teams I have seen before.

As the play goes on, a man wearing a Danville shirt wanders over to our section. It is obvious that he knows many of the men in the stands and a playful exchange begins to occur. Playful threats are tossed from the stands, “come up here” “put your money where your mouth is”. He remains on our sideline and finds one of his friends they hug, which quickly turns into a tackle. The parents walking in front of the stands wear sweatshirts with their sons names and numbers on the back. Throughout the game shouting from the men behind me in the stands, “Hit him”, the most common. They also heckle the ref a little bit.

There are definitely more East Knox fans at the game, even though Danville is so close. One of the men behind me, comments that Danville has a 300 pound player on the field, which is absolutely not true. Illustrates the fact that these players are bigger than life etc. Many people are wearing devil dog rivalry shirts, made specially for this game. There is a devil and a bulldog both fighting over a football, with an under-armour logo in the middle of the football. You really can feel the rivalry, there is an energy and excitement which I haven't felt at any other game. Part of the reason I feel the excitement is the level of student cheering, the group that was by the goal post, runs by our stands screaming and

holding up their signs one or two times during the first half alone. The Danville side has a fog-horn. The game is a defensive battle, there are three turnovers in the first quarter alone.

Many people have their hair dyed, painted faces, shirts etc. The student section is literally on the field. A group of middle school or early high school girls walk by, it is like they are trying to out do each other with flair. One has bulldog paws instead of normal under eye strips. I can count 7 coaches for East Knox. There is a three foot fence that separates the field from a small hill ten feet in front of the bleachers. Right next the field there are groups of kids. Some middle school kids talking, but mostly younger boys, like 9 or 10 years old. Some of these boys are chasing each other with a football and tackling each other. No adults are stopping them, they are running and tackling full speed running right next to the field of play, wearing East Knox football shirts.

There is a huge play, where number 22 holds on to the ball as he is hit hard. “Good Job! Man he got smashed!” “That’ll wake ya right up”. I get a phone call during the game, and I feel awkward when I pick it up, people are so intently focused on the game in my section, I definitely feel like an outsider. More shouts of “Hit Him” “Rock Him”. Besides the pre-made t-shirts and player sweatshirts etc there are also some home-made t-shirts in the crowd. There are also some Danville fans on the East Knox side. It is pretty obvious that these schools fraternize together, making the rivalry that much more intense.

At half time, they honor the 1988 undefeated team at Chet Looney stadium, the coach who retired from east Knox in 2005 after 35 years of coaching. East Knox also has purple golf pullovers. Of the 1988 undefeated team 12 are at the game. As they are standing up there, the men in the stands behind me comment, “See that 10-0 team out there? It’s been a while since we had one of those”. One of the men also begins talking about his son, who “Likes his band”. It sounds slightly condescending to me, but I can’t be sure. The Danville band takes the field at half time, followed by the East Knox band. It is as if the Band has groupies as well, the students come over to cheer for the band just as loudly as their football team.

There are flaming torch tricks, and they play contemporary songs, but similar to Danville’s band, it is small and has bitten off a bit more than it can chew. However, East Knox has more baton girls than any other of the schools I have seen.

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