

Football is a violent sport where linemen brag about knocking quarterbacks out, tacklers try to 'punish' runners, and coaches use war-like terms to describe their strategy.

Sometimes, that ultra-aggressive attitude spills off the field.

When Heisman Trophy contender Lawrence Phillips and another Nebraska running back were arrested last weekend for allegedly assaulting ex-girlfriends, it again focused attention on a disturbing problem: violent behavior by football players, particularly against women.

Rarely a week goes by without a report of a college or pro player beating a woman, getting into a fight at a bar or restaurant, or starting some other type of physical altercation.

'Football players are applauded for being violent on the field; it's something they're taught from an early age,' said Kathleen Holgerson of the University of Connecticut Women's Center.

'They're also part of a macho culture that doesn't respect women. When you add those two together, you have a problem.'

Certainly, the problem isn't limited to football players.

Violence against women is widespread, and is committed by doctors and lawyers and teachers as well as linebackers and running backs. It also has plagued athletes in other sports. Boxer Mike Tyson went to prison for rape, basketball star Scottie Pippen was arrested for allegedly shoving his fiancée against a car, baseball player Darryl Strawberry was accused of several domestic beatings, hockey goalie Mark Fitzpatrick allegedly kicked his pregnant wife, and golfer John Daly was accused of beating his wife.

But it seems a majority of the incidents in sports involve football players. While the O.J. Simpson trial has dominated the headlines, dozens of other current and former football players have been accused of assaulting or abusing women in the past year.

\_ Cincinnati Bengals defensive lineman Dan Wilkinson was charged with domestic violence after police said he punched his pregnant girlfriend in the stomach.

\_ Minnesota Vikings quarterback Warren Moon was charged with assault after his wife told police that he slapped her and 'choked her to the point of nearly passing out.'

\_ University of Florida defensive end Johnnie Church allegedly assaulted his wife, and teammate Teako Brown was accused of slapping his girlfriend and throwing her to the ground.

\_ Three SMU players were indicted for aggravated sexual assault of a 16-year-old girl in a motel room.

\_ Missouri receiver Rahsetnu Jenkins was charged with forcible rape.

\_ Walter Smith, co-captain of last year's Michigan team, pleaded no contest to assaulting his girlfriend.

\_ Three Idaho State players were charged with statutory rape.

'It seems every time you pick up the paper, you read about an athlete who's in trouble with the law, and many times the victim is a woman,' said Holgerson, who heads the Violence Against Women Prevention Program at UConn. 'This isn't a matter of boys being boys. We're talking about criminal behavior.'

While there are no definitive studies on the subject, research indicates that male college athletes are more likely to commit sexual assault than the general student population.

In a study released last year, researchers at Northeastern University and the University of Massachusetts looked at 107 cases of rape, attempted rape and fondling at 30 NCAA schools between 1990 and 1993. Male athletes at 10 of those schools made up only 3.3 percent of the male student body, but were involved in 19 percent of the assaults.

'There tends to be a hostile attitude toward women in locker rooms,' said Todd Crosset, an assistant professor of sport management at Massachusetts and co-author of the study. 'It's an all-male world where women are demeaned and degraded. If you really want to insult an athlete, you call him 'a sissy' or say 'he plays like a girl.''

Crosset's study didn't determine whether football players are involved in more assaults than athletes from non-contact sports like baseball or track. But he said he wouldn't be surprised if that were true.

'When you're trained to be violent, it can spill over to your private life,' said Crosset, a former swimmer at the University of Texas. 'It's not just a problem in sports. The armed forces are concerned about this and so are police departments.'

Training may not be the only factor.

Dr. Eli Chesen, a Lincoln, Neb., psychiatrist who has treated Nebraska football players, has found that many top athletes suffer from manic-depression, a condition characterized by extreme mood swings.

"Manic behavior can result in great creativity and achievement, but it can also lead to rage and violence. And that's what we're seeing with a lot of these football players," said Chesen, who is writing a book on the subject called "Darwin and the Running Backs."

Chesen thinks steroids also contribute to the problem. There is evidence that the muscle-building drugs can cause violent outbursts.

"Steroids have a kindling effect," Chesen said. "When you take a football player who's already very aggressive and add steroids to the mix, you've got a potentially explosive situation."

Whatever the cause, many athletes think they can get away with violent behavior because of their star status.

"These kids are treated like celebrities from the time they're in junior high school," said Donna Lopiano, executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation. "They don't think the rules apply to them. No matter what they do, they think their coach will pull some strings and get them out of trouble."

Lopiano said coaches need to be better educated about social issues like violence against women, so they can pass the information on to their players.

"We're probably the only country in the world that doesn't have a coach certification program," she said. "You need to be certified to be a librarian and to teach driver's ed, but not to supervise 100 people on a football field for three hours a day."

At the University of Connecticut, all male and female athletes are required to attend a program on acquaintance rape and dating violence.

"We want them to understand what the law is, and that there are lines you simply do not cross," Holgerson said.

Athletes accused of battering women rarely talk about it in public, and when they do, they usually try to make it seem like a minor offense. One of the few who has spoken candidly about the subject is Denver Broncos receiver Vance Johnson, who has admitted beating his first two wives.

In his 1994 biography, Johnson said he saw poor role models growing up in a Trenton, N.J., ghetto.

"Everywhere I looked, men abused women," he wrote. "There was absolutely no respect given to women in Trenton. All of the women were really battered and abused emotionally and physically. It was just a way of life, and no one ever did anything about it."

Lopiano said more educational programs are needed to deal with domestic violence by athletes.

"It's going to take a lot more attention from coaches, school administrators and the media," she said. "It's not going to go away if we ignore it."

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